



S O L A S

An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna
Further Education and Training Authority

**Specific Aspects of Further Educations and Training (FET)
Provision and Barriers to Participation in FET Programmes-
Amárach Research**

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Project Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SOLAS was established to develop and give strategic direction to the Further Education and Training (FET) Sector in Ireland. It is responsible for funding, planning and co-ordinating a wide range of training and further education programmes and has a mandate to ensure the provision of 21st century high-quality programmes to jobseekers and other learners. The strategic goals of SOLAS include planning, funding and driving the development of new, integrated and accessible FET services. At the centre of these goals is the aim to ensure that every learner has access to the best possible FET. This includes the building of a new learner focused FET service in Ireland that is fit for purpose and designed to meet future needs.

The goal of this project is to support active inclusion across FET provision. An action item associated with this objective is to ensure equality of opportunity and access to FET and equal treatment of learners by identifying strategies to address barriers to the participation of specific groups who are experiencing socio-economic exclusion and distance from education and/or the labour market. These groups specifically include the under 25's, the long term unemployed, people with disabilities, and members of migrant communities.

To examine the extrinsic and intrinsic barriers to participation in FET, SOLAS commissioned Amárach Research to carry out a national research project. This included the identification of barriers to these groups to Further Education and Training (FET) across four main themes. The main themes examined were motivational/dispositional, economic/social welfare, organisational and informational/guidance. Exploring these themes involved desk research, examining the relevant literature in the area in Ireland and other jurisdictions, and primary empirical research. The empirical research adopted a qualitative approach allowing for the examination of these barriers through the opinions of key cohorts. It included in-depth interviews and a series of focus groups capturing the opinions of a unique collation of cohorts including stakeholder organisations, learners (potential, past, current, and those who dropped out), educators, and employers.

While elements of this research reinforce existing awareness of the main economic barriers (including access to welfare, transport, and childcare costs), it also extends the examination of these barriers further to examine nuanced socio-cultural barriers. This illustrates that economic barriers alone do not tell the entire story.

The findings suggest that FET has undergone significant change and there are serious challenges encountered by learners from vulnerable groups seeking to engage with FET. These groups include the under 25's, the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities, and members of migrant communities. It also reinforced the existing view of the particular importance of including these vulnerable groups in education.

The research found that there are deep-seated socio-cultural barriers among these cohorts which prevent members of these groups from attending, remaining within, and/or employing the FET education they have completed to its maximum benefit.

This research expounds the voice of educators, clearly representing a group of passionate professionals who are keen to provide further input into the development of FET courses derived from the first-hand experience of teaching. The voice of the employer is also presented. They clearly define their ideal employee as someone who does not necessarily have to be qualified to degree level, but is a confident communicator with the specific skills required for the role. They also have the characteristics of someone who is willing to learn and actively contribute to the growth of the organisation.

This report includes the voice of key stakeholders illuminating an engaged network of organisations and individuals who are eager to participate in the development of the FET, and work with SOLAS towards reducing these barriers.

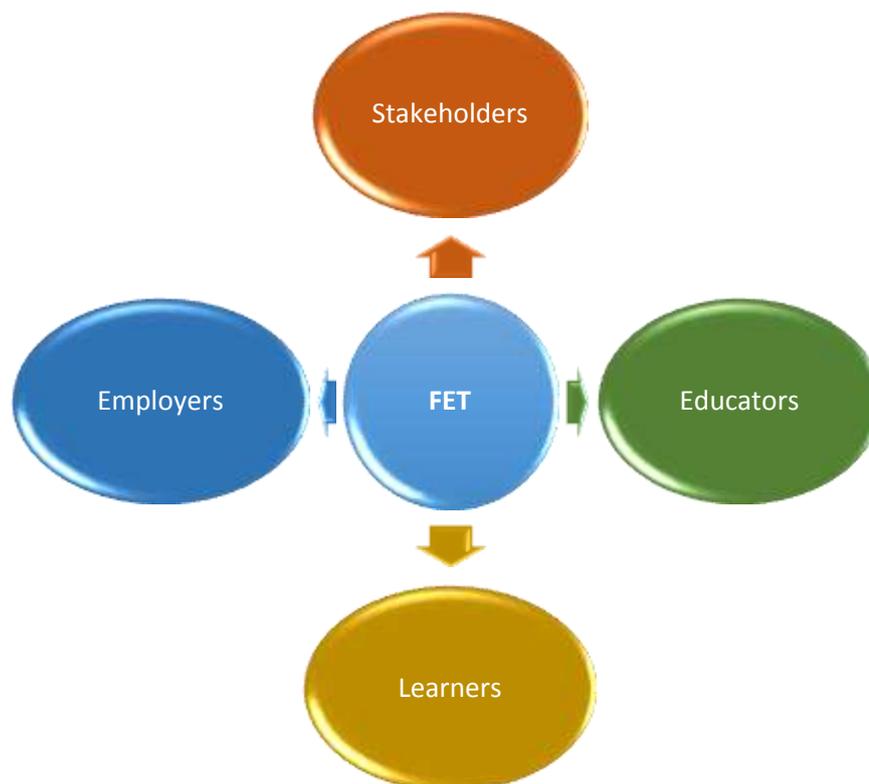


Figure 1: Participants in the study

Through the collation of the responses from these inputs, while there is a passionate network in Ireland seeking to reduce and remove all barriers to FET, significant barriers still exist for some of the most vulnerable groups in society.

Some of the most significant motivational / dispositional barriers included age, mental health, learning difficulties, confidence, stigma, self-esteem, a lack of fundamental skills (ICT, literacy, numeracy), and a negative experience of education resulting in a lack of value

placed on education. These resulted in a lack of trust in the quality of FET, confusion about different levels of commitment, time and requirements to obtain qualification at the same level, and reduces the ability for progression from FET into meaningful and long-term career. The report reinforced previous findings which suggest that economic barriers include social welfare, childcare, and transport while highlighting other issues such as the costs course attendance and materials. Organisational barriers include the course length, availability and flexibility, accessibility, and the impression that people were being registered on courses simply to get them off the live register. Finally, informational barriers include a lack of clear information about the courses, a lack of information regarding retention of social welfare payments, a lack of awareness of SOLAS and their role in FET, and clarity about the value of FET in attaining employment or accessing higher education.

Areas for consideration for SOLAS include: addressing challenges of these specific cohorts as particular cases; reducing the complexity in the FET system; ensuring a clarity around the availability of social welfare while attending FET; clearly defining the entry requirements, course requirements, and the direct benefits of participating in an FET course for the learner; proactive engagement with all stakeholders, educators, and employers in an ongoing dialogue at national and regional level; outreach to employers and engaging them in a dialogue; strategic and targeted communications clearly defining the identity and the role of SOLAS in FET; and, a clear overarching and message to individuals from the cohorts identified in this research that FET course is a direct pathway to employment or higher education.

This report points to a complex system in which the role of SOLAS is somewhat unclear. It also demonstrates a need, and passionate support, for the promotion of a world class FET system equally available to all groups. For learners, this should be considered a viable alternative to attending higher education or entering the workforce directly. It should also clearly offer opportunities to upskill / reskill while embracing lifelong education. The report specifically highlights the importance of FET to the realisation of active inclusion for the under 25's, the long term employed, people with disabilities, and members of migrant communities. It also points to the increasing importance of FET in education sector as a viable alternative to Higher Education or direct employment. Finally, this report illustrates the passionate support of learners, educators, employers and stakeholders for the growth and development of the FET system in Ireland.

The main challenge for FET in Ireland, specifically for these cohorts, is to encourage a more positive perception of FET among these groups and encouraging potential participant to view it as a high quality viable alternative, or pathway, to work or higher education.

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Key points in this chapter

- *The background to, and context of, the research study.*
- *The analytical framework employed is described.*
- *The report structure is introduced.*

CONTEXT FOR PROJECT

SOLAS has been established to develop and give strategic direction to the Further Education and Training Sector in Ireland. It is responsible for funding, planning and coordinating a wide range of training and further education programmes and has a mandate to ensure the provision of 21st-century high-quality programmes to jobseekers and other learners. The focus of SOLAS is to plan, fund and drive the development of a new, integrated and accessible Further Education and Training service.

SOLAS strives to ensure that every learner has access to the best possible Further Education and Training (FET) and is working to build a new learner focused FET service in Ireland that is fit for purpose and designed to meet future needs.

To achieve this, SOLAS works closely with a wide network of stakeholders including learners, employers, Education & Training Boards (ETB), Government Departments, state bodies, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the Higher Education Authority (HEA), Institutes of Technology (IOTs) and representative organisations. The aim is to build a clear, integrated pathway to work for learners through FET.

While the organisation has a very broad and challenging remit, the challenge of this project is more focused. A key issue for SOLAS for the future is to ensure support Goal 2 in the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 – 2019 which relates to active inclusion. This objective is to “ensure equality of opportunity and access to FET and equal treatment of learners by identifying strategies to address psychological, social and economic barriers to the participation of groups experiencing socio-economic exclusion/distance from the labour market” (RFT: 5).

This research was commissioned by SOLAS in 2016 to address specific actions associated with Goal 2, ‘Active Inclusion’, of the FET strategy 2014-2019. One of the two strategic objectives, within this goal, involves supporting Active Inclusion across all Further Education and Training provision. An action item associated with this objective is to ensure equality of opportunity and access to FET and equal treatment of learners by identifying strategies to address psychological, social and economic barriers to the participation of groups

experiencing socio-economic exclusion/distance from the labour market. This research falls under SOLAS's strategic principle of ensuring evidence-based policy and practice.

The focus of this project was to examine the barriers to participation in FET and to identify areas for consideration by SOLAS. These include the motivational, economic, organisational, and information barriers. To this end, the main objective was to identify, prioritise and propose solutions to the barriers to participation in FET faced by the long-term unemployed (those unemployed for over 12 months (LTU), under 25s not in employment, education or training (NEETs), people with disabilities, members of migrant communities, and lone parents.

Amárach Research designed and employed a mixed mode (qualitative and quantitative) approach to this project. Specifically, we conducted a literature review (desk research) which provided valuable information from different sources from Irish and international best practice (qualitative and quantitative). We also carried out primary qualitative research including: a series of thirty-two interviews with a wide range of stakeholders who are involved in FET in Ireland; and six focus groups with: potential learners, current learners, and those who had taken up an FET course and had left for various reasons across several locations in Ireland; a further two groups, one with educators who currently teach a variety of FET courses and employers; the two groups were conducted to capture the voice of these critical influencers in FET in Ireland. This allowed for a comprehensive examination of the subject area.

This approach ensured that we examine the opinions of a wide range of a relevant section of the population most at risk of not availing of FET, and an in-depth examination of the barriers they face.

IMPACT OF THIS RESEARCH

The work focuses on the main aims of the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 – 2019. In this report, we examine the participants understanding of FET; their interpretation of barriers to participation and what socio-cultural stigmas exist which act as barriers to participation; how effective communications about FET are; how individuals are incentivised to participate in FET and the efficacy of current practices; and finally, what opportunities exist to reduce these barriers and effectively increase awareness, and attitudinal and behavioural change.

Adopting this approach allows us to systematically describe the different barriers across the societal levels, examine them individually, and then analyse their interrelationships. The main purpose of adopting this approach is to examine these barriers from the individual's perspective, explore the barriers at the institutional level, and more clearly define where more effective communications can be employed to address these barriers.

The main areas that emerged in this research, under the main themes, can be summarised in the table below:

Barriers	Main Issues
Motivational/ Dispositional	Age
	Mental health
	Low confidence/self-esteem
	Negative educational experiences and/or familial disengagement with education
	Lack of community and social supports
	Negative view of FET / lack of belief that there is a purpose to taking part in a course
Economic and Social Welfare	Childcare
	Transport
	Social Welfare entitlements
Organisational	Courses on offer
	Delivery
	Eligibility requirements
	Computer skills
	Accessibility
Informational and Guidance	Lack of awareness of FET/SOLAS and confusion about roles of organisations
	Lack of information
	Lack of career guidance/course matching
	Lack of needs assessments

Figure 2: Summary of Main Barriers

The following report is laid out in six sections. Chapter 2: Project Methodology describes the research methods, approaches and analyses employed in Literature Review, Stakeholder Interviews and the Focus Groups. Chapter 3: Literature Review thematically analyses recent and relevant reports, research articles, and policy documents which describe the current state of FET in Ireland and contemporary thinking about the main barriers to FET in society. Chapter 4: Focus Groups describes the series of focus groups with non-participants, students who dropped out and graduates of FET courses as well as educators and employers who have direct experiences of the barriers not only to FET but the perceptions of FET in wider Irish society. Chapter 5: Stakeholder Interviews provides an analysis of the thirty-two stakeholders who were interviewed from key organisations directly, and indirectly, involved in FET in Ireland. Finally, Chapter 6: Analysis and Framing provides a synopsis analysis of the findings in the context of the framework set out above, and provides insights and

considerations for SOLAS in developing their recommendations to addressing these barriers. This approach allows us to identify and prioritise the main barriers to accessing FET faced by key groups, and propose actions which should be considered by SOLAS, ETBs, and other stakeholders in the FET system, the Department of Social Protection and other relevant organisations, to address these barriers.

This report contributes to the development of the evidence-based FET in policy and practice by providing the voice of the stakeholders, learners from some of the most vulnerable groups in society, educators, and employers.

Key points in this chapter:

- *Methodology for the research study is outlined.*
- *Desk research was conducted gathering relevant literature.*
- *The design, selection and recruitment of focus groups and stakeholders are outlined.*
- *The data collection and analysis strategies are briefly discussed.*

INTRODUCTION

Amárach applied a mixed-method approach including desk research (a literature review) and qualitative research (in-depth interviews and a series of focus groups) which allowed for a comprehensive examination of the subject area.

DESK RESEARCH

The literature review provided valuable insights into existing research in the area, current thinking regarding FET from a range of perspectives, and significant insights into studies conducted in FET. These defined the research parameters, sampling, method and instruments for the qualitative research aspects of the study.

This ensured that we could examine the requisite barriers effectively with a targeted and relevant section of the population. This allowed for the examination of a broad range of issues from existing research, and conduct an in-depth examination of current barriers to engagement of the unemployed with FET.

The outputs from the literature informed the approach taken for the other phases of the project by identifying key subject areas of interest and cohorts with whom the area should be explored.

STAKEHOLDER RESEARCH

SAMPLING

As outlined in the FET Strategy document, a range of FET partners exist and collaborate in the provision of FET. SOLAS's strategic principles include working consultatively and collaboratively with stakeholders. As such, for this qualitative research design, a purposive non-probability sampling approach was employed to represent a breadth and depth of expertise.

The following stakeholder groups engaged in this research process:

Sampling for Stakeholder Groups

- Government departments including:
 - The Department of Education and Skills
 - The Department of Jobs Enterprise and Innovation
 - The Department of Children & Youth Affairs
- Education and Training Boards (ETB's)
- State bodies including Intreo, Quality & Qualifications Ireland (QQI)
- Representatives from Secondary Education and Higher Education organisations
- Business and employer's groups
- Civil society groups and Non-Governmental Organisations who work with the unemployed, working with people living in poverty, adults with literacy issues, people with disabilities, migrant rights organisations, parent's groups,
- SOLAS staff from across a range of areas within the organisation
- Other organisations involved in education, employment, and working with people who experience disadvantage and social exclusion.

In total, close to fifty organisations were invited to interview, including other government departments, carers associations, NGO's and civil society groups, yet it was not possible to secure interviews with representatives from all of these organisations. In total 32 interviews were carried out.

FIELDWORK PREPARATION

To arrange the stakeholder interviews, Amárach worked closely with SOLAS in the identification and recruitment of the final sample. The initial list of participants was identified from the organisation types above. SOLAS contacted them in the first instance, and then Amárach followed up to arrange the interviews. We designed an in-depth interview guide based on our existing experience and subject matter knowledge at Amárach and the main goals of the research. They were based on: the examination of the organisation and the stakeholder's role; their involvement with FET; their opinions regarding the main barriers to FET; their role in the reduction of these barriers; and their opinions regarding the wider societal impacts of reducing the barriers to FET. We were particularly interested in moving beyond the practical challenges which have been well documented in previous studies (e.g. child care, transport) and explore more nuanced socio-cultural barriers; e.g. self-confidence, stigmas around literacy. This, it should be noted, does not in any way diminish the relevance of the practical challenges, but seeks to further examine the contexts within which they exist.

FOCUS GROUPS

SAMPLING

The sampling for the focus groups employed the same qualitative method. Central to SOLAS's strategic principles include ensuring that FET is learner and employer focused, including prospective learner and employer voices is crucial. The non-probability sample matrix approach allows for the identification of individual cohorts for recruitment. These cohorts are identified by a specific demographic profile (Demographic 1) and recruited to a group on this basis. This allows us to adopt a diverse and targeted recruitment pattern across demographics, groups and subject areas.

	Location	Rural / Urban	Gender	Age	Status	Engagement with FET
1	Dublin	Urban	Male	Mixed	Long-term unemployed	Never started FET course: 8 Started FET & dropped out: 0 Completed FET course: 0
2	Dublin	Rural	Mixed: Male: 4 Female: 4	17-25 years	Under 25's not in employment, education or training	Mixed: Never started FET course: 4; Started FET & dropped out: 4 Completed FET course: 0
3	Dublin	Mixed	Mixed: Male: 4 Female: 4	Mixed	Long-term unemployed	Mixed: Never started FET course: 4 Started FET & dropped out: 2 Completed FET course: 2
4	Galway	Urban	Female	17-25 years	Under 25's not in employment, education or training	Mixed: Never started FET course 4; Started FET & dropped out: 4 Completed FET course: 0
5	Galway	Urban	Mixed Male: 4 Female: 4	Mixed	Long-term unemployed	Mixed: Never started FET course: 4 Started FET & dropped out: 2 Completed FET course: 2

6	Cork	Mixed	Mixed Male: 4 Female: 4	17-25 years	Under 25's not in employment, education or training	Mixed: Never started FET course: 6; Started FET & dropped out: 2 Completed FET course: 0
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	Group	Gender	Size of Industry	Type of Industry	Employed someone with FET qualification	Location
7	Employers	Mixed	Mixed: SME's and Large Industry	Mixed: carers, security, ICT, finance,	This group included employers who had recruited their employees specifically from FET courses and some who had not.	Dublin

	Group	Gender		Location
8	FET Educators	Mixed	Mixed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme • Specific Skills Training • Back to Education Initiative • Post Leaving Certificate Course • Youthreach 	Dublin

Figure 3: Focus Group Recruitment Matrix

We selected six groups of people from the core demographics identified. They include those who had never taken part in an FET course, participants who took part in an FET course and completed it, and those who began a course and did not complete it. The participants ranged across a wide group of ages and genders. The groups also took part in several locations across the country to include some regional variation in the research.

We also conducted two additional groups with educators and employers. The rationale for these groups emerged from the literature review and stakeholder research where it became obvious that significant barriers to FET exist in the day to day experiences of the provision of courses and accessing employment upon the completion of a course. In addition, this allowed us to explore the validity of SOLAS's vision of a successful FET sector where

employers become engaged with FET and workplace development, and the need for sufficient and appropriate Continuing Professional Development opportunities for educators to ensure that they are meeting the needs of their students through appropriate and up to date methods (SOLAS, 2014a).

FIELDWORK PREPARATION

A recruitment guide was devised for each of these groups, and all participants were recruited independently through Amárach’s team of national recruiters.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Qualitative research supports the researcher in exploring, understanding, interpreting and mapping emerging social phenomena (Ritchie et al., 2013), and explores research questions which focus on the ‘how’ and ‘why’. It allows for flexible and responsive examination of emergent concepts and narratives, and yields rich and detailed content capturing a depth and breadth of the experiences of participants.

Interviews were carried out by senior and experienced qualitative researchers in October and November 2016. On average, the interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes each. The interviews were recorded on audio devices and inputted into a matrix template for analysis.

A ‘Framework’ (Ritchie et al., 2013) approach was taken. ‘Framework’ is a formal qualitative data analysis method developed by Spencer et al. (2003).

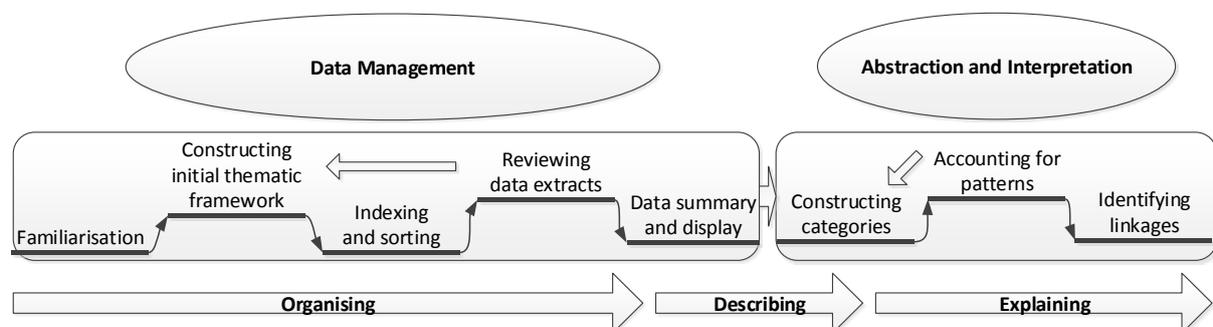


Figure 4: Formal Analysis Approach

The Formal Analysis Process lays out the overall approach taken to qualitative data analysis. This involves the construction of initial themes by: indexing and sorting perspectives about these strategic objectives by reviewing data extracts and organising them under these themes; summarising data and displaying a synopsis of analysed data; and, constructing categories and identifying linkages between information.

Data Sources	Themes				
	<i>Motivational/ Dispositional issues</i>	<i>Economic/ Social Welfare issues</i>	<i>Organisation of FET and the socio-economic groups</i>	<i>Information and Guidance</i>	Thematic Analysis
<i>Desk Research</i>					
<i>In-depth interview</i>					
<i>Focus Groups</i>					
	Frequency of issues that arose and emphasis				

Figure 5: Analytical framework model

This is the basis upon which to build a coherent thematic analysis. It also allows us to identify themes and subthemes which are most frequently reported and those which are most closely linked to each other. This allows an examination of how critical messages are framed.

Key points in this chapter:

- *Literature chosen and sources.*
- *Evolution of FET in Ireland.*
- *Barriers to FET and vulnerable groups.*
- *Barriers to engaging in FET.*
- *Relevance of Literature to the Present Study.*

INTRODUCTION

To capture a broad overview of the status of FET in Ireland and existing research which examined barriers to FET, a literature review was carried out. This section examines the evolution of FET in Ireland, barriers to FET (particularly among vulnerable groups), and the relevance of the findings to the present study. The outputs of this review feeds directly into the development of the empirical research design.

FET IN IRELAND

Further Education and Training (FET) refers to the provision of education and training at levels 1-6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) outside the traditional post-primary and Higher Education Institute trajectory. Its remit includes the provision of courses for jobseekers, school-leavers, employees, those upskilling and/or retraining and those looking for 'second-chance' education, as well as the delivery of basic skills and education for adult learners. "FET also plays an important role in helping people to lead fulfilling lives, supporting some of the hard-to-reach individuals and groups to achieve their potential and reducing the costs to society of exclusion" (SOLAS, 2014a; p21). Therefore, learners engage in the FET sector for a host of reasons from learning basic literacy skills, to completing state exams, to gaining vocational training, Continuing Professional Development or other lifelong learning activities. Historically, aspects of FET were provided either by FÁS (the previous Irish National Training and Employment Authority) Industrial Training or the Vocational and Educational Committees (VEC's) provided vocational education and community education. The previous 33 VEC's were replaced by the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) under the Further Education and Training Act 2013. SOLAS was established in 2013, alongside the ETBs, as the 'State Organisation with responsibility for funding, planning and co-ordinating

Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland'¹, ensuring that FET is funded and responsive to the needs of industry and learners.

In 2016, FET has been funded through an investment of over €634 million, and is projected to have provided training to 339,283 individuals through over 22,000 courses across a wide variety of areas. These are delivered through 16 ETBs, 22 state agencies and bodies and circa 34 voluntary secondary and community comprehensive schools². FET encompasses ten main types of provision which include: Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS); Post Leaving Certificate courses (PLCs); apprenticeships/work based learning; community education; statutory provision; traineeships; Youthreach; Specific Skills Training; Back to Education Initiative (BTEI); and literacy and numeracy courses (SOLAS, 2014a).³

SOLAS's vision for FET is that Ireland will have:

"A world class integrated FET system, highly valued by learners and employers, where a higher proportion of those who engage in FET including those with barriers to participation, such as persons with a disability as well as current priority cohorts identified by DSP such as long term unemployed persons, stay engaged, complete qualifications, transition successfully into employment, or where appropriate move into higher level qualifications in FET or HET."

(SOLAS, 2014a; p34)

SOLAS, as an organisation, has a broad remit whose strategy and vision has active inclusion at its core. Active inclusion, means ensuring that the most disadvantaged have open access to further training and/or education as appropriate and as such, this requires both identifying and subsequently removing key barriers.

The Government launched *Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025- Ireland's Future*⁴. The strategy *"identifies Ireland's current skills profile, provides a strategic vision and specific objectives for Ireland's future skills requirements, and sets out a road map for how the vision and objectives can be achieved"*⁵. This Strategy lays out the following key objectives:

- The establishment of a National Skills Council to oversee research, forecasting, and skills needs for the economy

¹ <http://www.SOLAS.ie/Pages/WhoWeAre.aspx>

² <http://www.SOLAS.ie/Pages/HomePage.aspx>

³ The proposed outcomes for learners are threefold: progression into paid employment; progression through FET or higher education; or progression into voluntary work or an employment scheme.

⁴ https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/pub_national_skills_strategy_2025.pdf

⁵ <http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2016-Press-Releases/PR2016-01-27.html>

- The development of the Regional Skills For a to provide “opportunity for employers and the education and training system to work together to meet the emerging skills needs of their regions.”⁶
- 50,000 apprenticeships and traineeships to be supported to 2020
- Development of an Entrepreneurship Education Policy Statement which will inform the development of entrepreneurship guidelines for schools.
- Transition Year, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and Leaving Cert Applied (LCA) students in schools and full-time students in further education and training and higher education benefit from work placements, and tracking this activity.
- A review of guidance services, tools and careers information for school students and adults.
- A review of the school leaver age with a view to increasing it.
- An increased focus on lifelong learning.

BARRIERS TO FET AND THE VULNERABLE GROUPS

The literature supports a central assumption made in this research, namely that growing up in socio-economic disadvantage is associated with poorer educational outcomes, including lower levels of attainment (Feinstein 2003; Melhuish et al. 2012) and a lower likelihood of school completion (Dale, 2010; Wodtke, Harding and Elwert 2011). Low literacy levels are also associated with poor life outcomes including school non-completion, low paid employment, unemployment, and lower likelihood of engaging in FET (Eivers, Shiel & Shortt, 2004).

The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), which was a survey of adult skills conducted in 2012 for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), found that Ireland has above the average number of people (17.9% compared to 16.7%) at or below Level 1 in literacy (CSO, 2013). As literacy and numeracy issues are associated with poorer life outcomes, high levels of people with literacy difficulties in Ireland should be considered in a policy context. For example, employment prospects of people with literacy and numeracy difficulties who become unemployed are poorer, with this group more likely to become long term unemployed (Kelly, McGuinness & O’Connell, 2012).

UNEMPLOYED PERSONS

During the recession in Ireland, unemployment disproportionately affected those within the 25-44 age range while youth unemployment also rose significantly (Sweeney, 2013). Unemployment became increasingly associated with previous educational attainment, gender, nationality and location (Sweeney, 2013). In 2014 Irelands economic recovery was

⁶ <http://www.regionalskills.ie/#sthash.fuORSLWy.dpuf>

reflected in the unemployment rates which fell back below 10% for the first time since 2009⁷.

The seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for February 2017 was 6.6% according to the CSO⁸. The unemployment rate for 15-24 year olds (youth unemployment rate) decreased from 22.3% in February 2015 to 14.5% in February 2017⁴. The long-term unemployment rate also decreased from 6.0% to 4.7% over the year to Q1 2016⁹. The long-term unemployed (LTU) categorised as those who remain on the live register for over 12 months (Sweeney, 2013). In 2013, 60 percent of those on the live register were classified as LTU and nearly a quarter had been unemployed for over three years (ibid). In quarter 1 of 2016, LTU had dropped to 56.1% of total unemployment¹⁰. Overall this shows that while unemployment levels have dropped, long term unemployment and unemployment for the under 25's remain an issue. Not in Employment or Education or Training (NEETs)

The OECD's (2014) report on *Local Youth Employment Strategies: Ireland* states that there were rapid increases in the levels of those under 25s not in employment or education or training (NEET) in Ireland during the recessionary period, which grew to represent one of the highest rates in the EU. While these rates are now dropping, targeting NEETs to engage them in FET or employment remains a priority in the overall strategy for reducing long term unemployment.

A challenge remains that this group is not homogenous and in fact contains significant diversity within it. This is supported by The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) research findings:

"NEET sub-groups range from the most disadvantaged and disengaged to those who become NEET after dropping out of a course or losing a job, or simply deciding to be NEET."

(Eurofound, 2012)

NEET subgroups include members of the cohorts of interest to this study: young people who have been made redundant; are suffering from an illness and/or have disabilities or are carers; as well as those with the ability to seek work or training yet decide not to pursue FET or employment (Eurofound, 2012).

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

The *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act* (2004) legislates for people with disabilities to have the right to be educated with their peers. In addition, The *Equal Status Act* (2000-2011) puts into law that reasonable accommodations are to be made

⁷ <http://www.cso.ie/px/pxeirestat/Statire/SelectVarVal/saveselections.asp>

⁸ <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/mue/monthlyunemploymentfebruary2017>

⁹ <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/qnhs/quarterlynationalhouseholdsurveyquarter12016/>

¹⁰ [Ibid](#)

to enable people with disabilities to participation in education/training. The legislation does not, however, serve to remove other barriers encountered. These include attitudinal or structural barriers such as negative peer experiences, low expectations of teachers, and a lack of disability-specific accommodations (Green, 2007; Hughes, 2010; Walk, 2015). These barriers compound the fact that children with disabilities are likely to be less engaged with school and have lower educational attainment (Watson, Banks & Lyons, 2015). Consequently, students with disabilities are more likely to leave school early (Dale, 2010) and proportionately fewer people with intellectual disabilities attend secondary level and third level education as compared to the general population (Walk, 2015)¹¹. Irish research has found that people with disabilities are more likely to rely on social welfare payments for at least part of their income, and be at risk of deprivation or poverty compared to those without a disability (Watson et al., 2015).

MEMBERS OF MIGRANT COMMUNITIES

During the Celtic Tiger from the mid-1990's to 2007/8, a period of substantial economic prosperity, Ireland changed from a country of net outward migration to net inward migration. The impact of economic growth encouraged an influx of migrants from the UK, across the European Union, Australia, Canada, the USA, and a broad range of other countries. Despite economic prosperity, a lower proportion of the migrant population were in employment than the native population (O'Connell & McGinnity, 2008). Country of origin was highly related to employment rates with those not from English speaking countries least likely to be employed (ibid); while migrants who find employment are overrepresented in low paid, shift or temporary work (MRCI, 2015a). Mooney (2014b) examined labour exploitation of migrant communities and identified the main risks faced by ethnic minorities in the labour market including: language barriers which present significant issues in outreach programmes and the provision of information to communities of foreign nationals both of which are issues for the provision of FET.

It is in this context that proficiency in English is highlighted as a critically important aspect of adult education in FET. This is exemplified by the roll out of the English as a Second Language (ESOL) courses., which enable members of the migrant community more easily identify which courses they may be able to avail, what these courses entail, and what opportunities and career paths this may offer them. In addition, in 2012 the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) found that one fifth of adult literacy learners were ESOL learners. Unfortunately, the recession meant that vulnerable groups, including migrants and those with disabilities, were more likely to become unemployed, either as NEETs or otherwise (Eurofound, 2012). Therefore, we can see that FET progression can act as an important bridge to employment, integration, and the reduction in exploitation for migrants in Ireland.

¹¹ Please note: statistics for attendance of people with disabilities for FET are unavailable.

LONE PARENTS

One quarter of families in Ireland are one-parent families, under half of whom are in work (SVP, 2014). Ireland also has one of the lowest rates of labour participation by lone parents in Europe (Chzhen & Bradshaw, 2012). According to the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC, 2014), one parent households are twice as likely to be at risk of poverty¹². This is reflected in the Society of Saint Vincent dePaul report which identified that requests for support and assistance most often come from lone parent households (SVP, 2014). Lone parents are less likely to have upper secondary, further or higher educational qualifications than the general population (Chzhen & Bradshaw, 2012). This has important implications for the FET sector, since education and training provides an opportunity to reduce barriers to employment. However, research has found that the ability of lone parents to engage in employment is highly dependent on policy changes and available supports (SVP, 2014).

BARRIERS TO ENGAGING IN FET

Within the literature, many barriers to FET are defined and categorised in different ways across different societal levels.

INDIVIDUAL / COMMUNAL BARRIERS

Individual, or intrinsic barriers, reside within the person and include motivational and dispositional barriers.

MOTIVATIONAL BARRIERS

Motivational barriers may stem from previous negative experience of school and education, a lack of value placed on learning by family, the perception of FET as of low value, or the impression that extrinsic barriers are insurmountable.

Individuals who have personally motivating goals tend to engage and perform better in education (Martinez & Munday, 1998). This implies that motivation is a crucial element in engagement and performance in FET. Motivation for engaging in education changes across the life-course and depends on both internal and external factors including life stages, previous educational attainment, and job requirements among others (Chao, 2009). Motivation to engage with education and training begins early in the life course: many parents and/or caregivers act as primary educators for children; choosing and engaging with schools; helping with homework; and teaching and promoting early literacy skills (Department of Education and Skills, 2006). A tradition of familial disengagement with

¹² <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditions2014>

education can present a high attitudinal barrier (Bailey & Coleman, 1998). Further, when value has not been attributed to education, training or employment it can be hard to alter this perception and create recognition of the value of education. The value parents place on education in the early school years impacts not only attendance but also early educational attainment (Bailey & Coleman, 1998; Janus & Duku, 2007). School attendance is particularly crucial for socioeconomically disadvantaged children to mediate the socio-economic status (SES) attainment gap (Ready, 2010) and address barriers to social mobility. Critically, when parents place low value on education or are disengaged from the education system, absenteeism is more likely (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015; Ready, 2010).

Many studies have found that early negative school experiences reduce the likelihood of engaging in education in later years (Crosnoe & Cooper, 2010), including FET (Eurofound, 2012). Negative school experiences have long-term impacts on motivation to learn and self-efficacy beliefs around learning (Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2013; Eurofound, 2012). For many, the school-like aspects of some further education can have negative associations and, for some, traumatic memories (NALA, 2010). This can be further compounded by negative experience of FET; particularly where courses encountered are unsuited to the individual or do not lead to employment (Sweeney, 2013).

The Society of Saint Vincent dePaul study *It's the hardest job in the world* (2014) found that lone parents' motivation to engage in education and training was based on hopes and expectations that it would lead to employment, or better paid, more secure employment. In the context of recession, the scarcity of subsequent employment opportunities can have a negative impact on motivation to train or engage in education; particularly for NEETs (Eurofound, 2012). However, past Irish research has concluded that:

“the number of determinedly unwilling learners is small and that the far greater challenge for FET providers is the much larger numbers of unemployed people who do not know the potential value to them of FET or believe it is beyond them, find themselves on courses for which they are unsuited, or who are unable to sustain the costs and demands of participating in FET even though they are enjoying it and realise it is of benefit. There can be a strong belief on the part of the low skilled unemployed that FET is ‘not for them’. This is, frequently, because of their previous poor experiences of formal education.” (Sweeney, 2013, p65-66).

Studies find that motivation to take up education, training or employment is high in lone parents; instead it is suggested that it is extrinsic barriers which tend to prevent this from occurring (SVP, 2014). Similarly, research on people with disabilities have not found motivation to engage in education or training to be a barrier (Judge, Rossi, Hardiman & Oman 2015).

Chao (2009) outlines motivational barriers specific to some of the active inclusion groups, namely the coercion of unemployed people to engage in education through the “punitive

act of the withdrawal of unemployment benefits for non-participation in adult learning for the case of most welfare states” (Chao, 2009:909). Similarly, new immigrants may engage in FET by making a personal choice to upskill or further educate oneself, or alternatively “through extrinsic pressures of the government to integrate by learning their host countries culture [or] language” (Chao, 2009: 909). Therefore, it is important that FET providers understand the motivating factors which encourage adult learners to participate in FET to increase and sustain engagement with the courses.

DISPOSITIONAL BARRIERS

Dispositional barriers to engaging in FET can include a lack of confidence and poor self-esteem, particularly stemming from being absent from the labour market and a consequential lack of self-confidence about skills and one’s ability to acquire them. Owens (2000) found that marginalised men felt that low attainment levels and help-seeking undermined their masculinity which compounded a sense of powerlessness and acted as a barrier to the uptake of FET. Confidence and self-efficacy beliefs around learning issues can also arise for those who have not engaged in education in a long time (Falasca, 2011), or for those with low levels of literacy and numeracy (Bailey & Coleman, 1998). Confidence issues have been found to impact those who have previous higher qualifications and so cannot be underestimated when evaluating barriers for more marginalised groups (Norman & Hyland, 2003). For some, engaging in courses at a lower level to build confidence and positive educational experiences are crucial for pathways to employment (Aontas, 2015). Further, health difficulties and mental health problems present the highest barriers to engaging in either FET or the labour market. This is recognised by the Australian employment service system which identifies people with mental health problems, the homeless, and those with addictions, as the most disadvantaged and marginalised (SOLAS, 2014b).

INSTITUTIONAL / SOCIETAL BARRIERS

Societal, or extrinsic, barriers are those which stem from outside the individual. In the context of FET, they can be categorised into three distinct groupings: economic or social welfare issues; organisational issues; and information and guidance issues.

ECONOMIC/ SOCIAL WELFARE ISSUES

Economic or social welfare barriers to engaging in FET can include the financial consequences of taking up FET. For individuals on the live register, this impact depends on the courses attended as there is significant variability in social welfare entitlements across FET courses. Social welfare entitlements can both force people to engage in courses in which they have little interest, as a means of retaining payments, or can prevent people from taking up courses in which they have an interest due to a lack of financial support. The Society of Saint Vincent dePaul (SVP) (2014) outlines this as a significant issue for lone parents, since motivated parents may be prevented from starting FET qualifications due to the potential loss of supplementary payments such as medical cards or the rent allowance.

The FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2014a) acknowledges that income support is crucial for Active Inclusion.

Beyond the barriers to taking up FET as represented by the potential loss of social welfare entitlements, additional costs are associated with taking up any course. For those dependent on one income or social welfare, transport costs may be prohibitive to attending centres multiple times a week (Eurofound, 2012; SVP, 2014). This is particularly prominent in rural areas where there are fewer service options (Bailey & Coleman, 1998; Eurofound, 2012; Society of Saint Vincent dePaul, 2014). For individuals with literacy or numeracy issues the stigma of taking part in an FET course may prevent them from attending a course. Similarly, transport can act as a barrier for individuals with disabilities (McGuckin, Shevlin, Bell & Devecchi, 2013).

A lack of family support, either parental or partner, and caring commitments also present barriers to engagement in FET (Martinez & Munday, 1998). Other practical barriers which arise for individuals include the associated childcare costs or availability of childcare when undertaking a course (Eurofound, 2012; SOLAS, 2014b; Society of Saint Vincent dePaul, 2014, 2016).

For stay-at-home parents, not on social welfare, challenges of childcare and the lack of eligibility for supports can be prohibitive to engagement (Aontas, *unpublished* 2016). For migrant populations, barriers such as residential status and country of origin can present significant challenges for engagement with FET. Individuals in direct provision are not entitled to engage in DSP funded programmes (Dunbar, 2008).

Despite a difference in the way in which economic and social welfare barriers affect each of the target groups, it is evident that cost and economic supports still represent significant barriers to engagement.

ORGANISATIONAL BARRIERS

STEMMING FROM THE REFORM OF FET

SOLAS and the ETBs are challenged with integrating two distinct areas: further education and vocational training. Effectively designing and implementing programmes which include both areas has resulted in a broad range of ETB courses. Examples include PLCs; Youthreach (education, training and work experience programme for early school leavers aged 15 – 20); VTOS (opportunities to improve general level of education, gain certification, develop skills and prepare for employment, self-employment, and further education and training); and Community Education (adults learning programme encouraging people to return to or continue their education). The breadth of courses is very diverse. The breadth and type of course offerings represent another organisational challenge for potential FET students when choosing a course.

STEMMING FROM PERCEPTIONS OF QUALITY

The OECD report *Local Youth Employment Strategies: Ireland* (2014) identifies a ‘disconnect’ between provision and local needs in FET in Ireland. Course offerings should, therefore, be determined by regional skills deficits. ETBs oversee the provision of FET in their area and complete annual returns which provide feedback on the status and progress of the implementation of their local FET programme. While this provides feedback, they do not provide direct input into the strategic planning process which guides course offerings at a local level. In some cases, we found, that several colleges offer similar courses across multiple jurisdictions which may or may not be relevant to the socio-economic issues of the community and area. This leads to course cancellation if requisite minimum numbers to run the course are not achieved.

McGuinness et al. (2014) and Sweeney (2013) found that the quality of FET courses can vary based on the individual course and the college in which it is taught. Further, the provision of courses is not always aligned with the skill needs of employers of the local area. Employers having little understanding of FET and may not recognise that they address their skill needs (Sweeney, 2013). This reduces the potential for individuals to progress from FET to work, and further compound the perception that FET courses are ineffective in enabling individuals to secure employment resulting in a perception that there is little long-term gain in participating in an FET course. This deters individuals from taking part. This is particularly true where short-term economic losses are conceded on the basis that the long-term gain will be worth the time, effort and financial losses incurred while they participate in the course (SOLAS, 2014a).

An example of a programme that has been established to specifically address this issue is the *Fast Track to Information Technology* (FIT), or the ‘*The ICT Talent Pipeline*’¹³. This is a technology-employer linked service which aims to ameliorate the lack of pathways from some FET courses to employment. FIT work with employers in the technology industry to create courses delivered by ETBs which provide students with valuable skills to the sector. Links with employers are not only valuable for the creation of FET courses but also to ensure that employers are aware of the standard and quality of accredited courses and the skills that FET completers could bring to the workforce. SOLAS, among other funders, funds FIT.

STEMMING FROM COURSE DESIGN AND DELIVERY

Staff in FET courses are expected to be able to deliver courses which are appropriate for all students from a diverse range of backgrounds and abilities including: those with disabilities; those with little English; members of migrant communities; and those who have not engaged in education in a long time. As outlined by Chao (2009), adult learners often have different motivations for learning, have a different frame of reference through which they

¹³ <http://fit.ie/>

view information and may require specific supports based on situational or personal barriers.

For example, adult learners who have had negative experiences of mainstream schooling are unlikely to respond well to a similar delivery style to school. An interviewee in research by Feeley and Hegarty (2013) demonstrated the negative effects of delivering FET in a similar way to school: 'Once before in a class I had a 'bad' tutor... a retired teacher. It felt like punishment all the time and I thought the year would never end' (Feeley and Hegarty, 2013; 37). The FET strategy outlines the school-like delivery of FET as a by-product of the funding structure for colleges. As FET courses are aimed primarily at adult learners, this approach represents a barrier to the effective implementation of the education programmes. SOLAS recognises a strategic movement towards greater flexibility in delivery is necessary (SOLAS, 2014a).

A further example is FET students with special educational needs (SEN). For SEN students, attending a full-time course may result in overexertion; a more flexible or blended learning approach may be more appropriate (Duggan & Byrne, 2013). In addition, many individuals with SEN require support services, adaptations and/or assistive technologies which may not be available in all ETBs. Despite legislative requirements to have an access programme for learners with disabilities, prejudice or a lack of open-mindedness can create a barrier for those with intellectual disabilities. Walk (2015) *Accessing Mainstream Training: Barriers for People with Intellectual Disabilities* report found within FET that "colleges are unable to offer support because many do not believe that it is part of their role to provide education and training to people with intellectual disabilities. Lack of knowledge and familiarity ...contributed significantly to this resistance" (Walk, 2015; 14).

Similarly, in the UK, flexibility of FET programme delivery has been critiqued by adult learners (see Martinez & Munday, 1998) and NEETs (Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2013). NEETs also related similar issues around course content and format as being substantial barriers to engagement "interviewees identified factors such as the style of learning, relationships with teachers, the learning environment, and a lack of enjoyment or interest in the content of the course, as being particularly unhelpful" (Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2013).

STEMMING FROM ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

For individuals with numeracy and literacy difficulties, course structure and delivery prevent individuals from seeking appropriate levels of courses. Literacy and numeracy supports could be incorporated into the planning and delivery of FET courses to enable skill development; particularly since low levels of basic skills are associated with drop-out from courses (Martinez & Munday, 1998). Current research is unclear as to whether integrating literacy/numeracy training is best practice or whether it should be segregated (SOLAS, 2014a).

Courses may have eligibility requirements which include a minimum length of time on live register before they are eligible to apply for a course (Aontas, forthcoming 2017). Also, the standard September start date may force people to remain on the live register longer rather than attending a course.

For migrants, a lack of recognition of their qualification from other jurisdictions can also be a barrier to participation on certain courses (Dunbar, 2008).

Time can be a barrier in this case, since building eligibility requirements may take several years. An alternative provision option is the use of distance and/or blended literacy learning, further discussed below under reducing barriers.

INFORMATION & GUIDANCE BARRIERS

A lack of awareness or information has been cited as a barrier to participation in FET for close to 30 years yet persists as an issue for each of the target groups (e.g. Bailey & Coleman, 1998; Martinez & Munday, 1998; Owens, 2000; Dunbar, 2008; Duggan & Byrne, 2013; Sweeney, 2013). The National Adult Learner Forum (Aontas, 2017) published suggested that additional resources should be allocated to the marketing and advertising of FET courses, with specific open days in ETBs and colleges to allow a greater dissemination of detailed information.

The creation of SOLAS, ETBs and QQI represent changes in the organisational structure and funding with which individuals must now familiarise themselves

However, individuals often access FET courses through self-referral or the social welfare system (SOLAS, 2014) neither of which provide career guidance. Guidance in the selection of courses is particularly important for student retention (Martinez & Munday, 1998); dropout rates can be high when courses are not as anticipated, require higher skills or do not provide vocational skills. When appropriate guidance is absent or unavailable, this has a direct negative impact on learner satisfaction, engagement and course completion.

For LTU and disengaged learners, guidance and counselling may also be needed to help with other personal problems which may have resulted in their current employment status. For example, individuals struggling with mental health problems or alcohol or substance abuse problems require additional guidance/counselling supports beyond the academic and strategic guidance needs of a learner, regarding course choices or potential career paths.

Feedback from the National Adult Learner Forum (Aontas, forthcoming 2017) included a recommendation that guidance should be made available to every learner prior to commencing, during, and following their uptake of an FET course. In addition, learners who accessed FET through Employment Support Services felt that staff should have greater awareness of local FET options and the ability of participation in FET to open career pathways and employment opportunities (Aontas, forthcoming 2017). Information about

FET should include specific information for learners about social welfare entitlements and all provision of information about FET should also be tailored to the individual, and provided in a clear and accessible way (Aontas, forthcoming 2017).

At present the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) are developing a framework for the establishment of a guidance strategy for FET in the context of a Department of Education and Skills (DES) led review of guidance within the education sector.

PRESENT STUDY

FET has undergone significant change in recent years in response to the challenges both within the sector and the economy. As part of the FET strategy to 2019, Active Inclusion, or the inclusion of disadvantaged or hard-to-reach groups is a core strategic goal. An exploration of existing literature demonstrates the importance of including vulnerable groups in education and the numerous challenges encountered by learners seeking to engage with FET. Previous research found motivational, economic, organisational and informational/guidance barriers to engaging with FET; providing an overarching model through which to explore learner, employer, educator and stakeholder views.

Key points in this chapter

- *Focus groups were conducted with target groups of prospective learners (namely the long-term unemployed and under 25s not in employment, education or training), and a group each with those who teach FE courses (FE educators) and employers.*
- *Barriers mentioned by focus groups of prospective learners to engaging in FET are outlined, including motivational/dispositional, economic and social welfare, organisational and information and guidance barriers.*
 - *Motivational barriers mentioned by prospective learners included previous school experience, familial emphasis on education and the profile of FET.*
 - *Dispositional barriers mentioned included confidence, learning difficulties and the impact of age on self-efficacy beliefs around learning.*
 - *Economic and social welfare issues were mentioned including the impact of encountering FET as a precondition for welfare payments, potential loss of social welfare payments, costs affiliated with courses, and the cost of travel and childcare.*
 - *When considering FET, or discussing reasons for dropping out, prospective learners stated that the organisation and range of courses, presence of work experience or placements, instructor style, and ability or transparency to progress to work or further qualifications acted as barriers to continuing their education.*
 - *A perceived lack of information and guidance regarding FET was also regarded as a barrier by prospective learners.*
- *Findings from a focus group of FE educators are presented regarding their perception of barriers for engagement by prospective students.*
- *Findings from a group of employers across a diverse range of sectors are presented regarding their perceptions of FET, willingness to employ an FET*

INTRODUCTION

This section examines the findings of qualitative research conducted through focus groups. Participants in these groups included a range of FET graduates, potential learners, and those who have started courses and not completed them. Two focus groups were also conducted with educators and employers. This, critically, adds their unique perspectives to this evaluation of FET allowing the identification of barriers that exist for educators in the provision of these courses, and the perception of FET by employers. This range of participants allows the exploration of barriers to the potential participants, those who had taken courses and what additional hidden barriers may exist; e.g. challenges in providing a

positive learning environment, what employers are looking for and the value they place on FET courses. Groups were conducted in Dublin, Cork and Galway to provide some regional variation in the perspectives. This allowed us access a diverse range of perspectives and educational attainment levels.

Findings were examined under the main research headings: motivation/disposition,

It should be noted that the opinions presented throughout this chapter represent participants in the focus groups, and while they may or may not be factually accurate, they do represent their experiences.

economic and social welfare barriers; organisational barriers; and informational barriers.

STUDENTS

MOTIVATION/DISPOSITIONAL BARRIERS

PREVIOUS SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

One of the most consistent findings across learner groups was that previous experiences of school tended to be negative and prospective learners, in many cases, had not attained particularly high educational qualifications.

Many respondents did not like school *“never really like secondary school from the start”* (G1) which resulted in poor attainment and low motivation to go back to education. A common issue that respondents had with school was an inability to engage in structured class based learning:

“I hated school...hated it with a passion...couldn't sit in a class for 40 minutes, I got too agitated” (D2)

“didn't have attention span for it” (D3)

Respondents also mentioned having issues with the way that schools are run:

“the way they taught you in school; not into that. They were backwards back in the day” (D3)

For many, the idea that FET would be like school was daunting, *“just the thought of the work...the workload”* (D3); while for others, being treated like they were in secondary school, was demotivating. Some prospective learners reported hearing about FET courses which were similar in structure and teaching practices to school which acted as a deterrent:

“like school lots of things, you’re never going to use” (C1)

“when I did the two weeks of that course...it was exactly like school...come in in the morning, small break, lunch break” (C1).

Many students mentioned that they struggled with ‘traditional book learning’. They found ‘theory’, or non-applied learning, difficult and felt that in some courses this was excessive. Instead, courses which enabled movement and kinaesthetic learning appeared to have greater appeal. A few former-students mentioned that they had dropped out due to the unforeseen emphasis on book, or rote learning in courses which they had presumed to be practical; the example of those who had enrolled in a social care course was provided. However, many people who had previously engaged in FET had had a good experience *“I loved FÁS...not just in one class, moved around” (D2)*. They compared it favourably to school:

“I found school very stressful... [the instructors] helped you, they understood, they didn’t expect anything, they just expected you to do your best” (D3)

Many people also found that they learned a lot while also growing as a person

“I found it very good to get more confidence in yourself...I quite enjoyed it...well I must have if I went back” (D3).

Among the long-term unemployed groups, many older respondents had been actively employed up to the recession in Ireland. There was a perception that workforce requirements had been different when they left school, less focused on accreditation, and they were now being confronted by an overemphasis on education and training, and a reduced value placed on experience.

“Think it was easier a few years back when you could walk into a factory and ask for work” (D2)

CULTURAL/FAMILIAL EMPHASIS ON EDUCATION

Some of the more motivated respondents spoke about socio-cultural stigma that they encountered due to being on social welfare and turning down jobs to pursue FET: *“you’re being lazy” (D2)*. One respondent remarked that peers were encouraging him to get a job in a fast food restaurant:

“there’s nothing wrong with working in [fast food restaurant] but I don’t want to do that...I believe I have more potential than that...and people slate you” (D2)

A couple of younger respondents also mentioned that a family engagement with education would help to pursue and engage in courses:

“having parents who have gone through education is not important but it would be helpful” (G1).

PROFILE OF FET

For some, FET did not seem to be an attractive option or they did not have the motivation to commence formal education or training:

"I'm more interested in going out and working than doing a course" (C1)

"at some stage...not now ... I've a little girl...maybe when she's at school" (C1).

Several younger respondents who had dropped out of school had not considered FET as an option. Instead, local Youthreach centres were seen very much as a last resort. Several early school leavers felt that they would rather go back to school than go to Youthreach.

"I'd rather go back to school" (G1)

"I heard you learn nothing there" (G1)

Youthreach, for the most part, had a negative reputation. One individual had gone to Youthreach and criticised it as being too easy *"too basic...like 1st year" (D3).*

Others felt that FET was not necessarily for them or would not have known enough information about the scope of the sector *"I always thought PLC's were a gateway to third level" (D3).*

DISPOSITIONAL BARRIERS

Confidence was an issue for many respondents when contemplating returning to education or training:

"I'd be nervous to do a course" (D3).

However, one respondent who had completed a course remarked that courses act to boost confidence and motivation which can slump when you are unemployed:

"you become more chatty when you do a course as well...when you're unemployed you get into a rut and become unmotivated...once you get out there and do a course, and start, it becomes easier [to socialise]" (D3).

Numerous older respondents spoke of the impact of their age on their self-efficacy beliefs around learning. For some this was due to the length of time since they had been in an educational context, while for others their skills, abilities and confidence around acquiring new skills was a substantial barrier.

"I've been out of work with the kids for a long time; I would be nervous about doing the course" (D3)

For some, the prospect of approaching education again with learning difficulties was daunting:

“I’ve dyslexia, doing an essay scares the life outta me...do they do extra help?” (D1).

Older respondents spoke about how they felt younger students would naturally have skills that they themselves might struggle with, e.g. computer skills, which could cause embarrassment.

“I was afraid to say my son typed it [my essay]” (G2)

Older respondents were also more likely to talk about concerns around mixed-aged classes; feeling that younger people may want to socialise or not take a class seriously, while for them education or training was seen as a second- or last-chance.

“you don’t want to go into a room full of young fella’s that are only there because their dole is going to get cut” (D1)

“if you have an older group they’re there because they want to be there not because they didn’t know what to do when filling out a CAO form” (D1)

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL WELFARE BARRIERS

SOCIAL WELFARE ACTIVATION

Most respondents were in receipt of social welfare payments which impacted their perspectives of FET in several ways. Many had encountered FET courses as one of the terms and conditions of their payments:

“you find yourself in some cold room at some course, just so your social welfare doesn’t get cut off” (D1)

“you don’t even care what they’re saying” (D1)

Some individuals had had positive interactions with social welfare, Intreo and case officers in the new system; while others had previously positive experiences of FÁS

“if you keep at the welfare they will help you...they won’t leave you with nothing” (D2)

“I know a guy who did a security course that cost €550 and the dole paid €500 and he only had to pay €50” (D2)

Others felt that they were mildly threatened or coerced by the social welfare system to begin FET or suffer the consequential cuts to their payments.

“I was told I could do a course or [I would] be cut off the dole...so I did computers...it was horrific...I was forced...wasn't run very well” (C1)

“you're made do some course you don't want, it's pushed on you...you're told you have to or you'll be cut off” (D1)

Other learners/potential learners spoke of “bullying” by the social welfare system to ensure that they started a FET course, with the threat that welfare payments would be cut.

“social welfare bully people, if you've been on social welfare for a while they'll just start giving you letters and letters...you'll be in a room and told if you don't start this they'll take your money so you don't have a choice in the matter” (D2)

Choices for these courses were limited and very little information was provided, so respondents felt forced into taking an FET course whether or not it was something in which they had an interest.

For many this resulted in starting courses which were suggested for them, with little prior knowledge of the course content. This led to little or no motivation for the course, or learners who were unsuitable for a course resulting in dropping out.

Many of the long term unemployed had little to no experience of interacting with case officers in Intreo and felt that they were not being viewed as individuals but figures to reduce the numbers on social welfare.

“It's trying to bring down the numbers for the social welfare...no thought is given to the individual, it's just figures” (D1)

“anyone on a course is a number off the live register” (G2)

For others, the social welfare payment did not provide sufficient motivation to engage with a course

“when you're 17 the wage is €40 a week and I know it's better than nothing at all but I'd rather do nothing for the full week and get nothing...than do a full week and get €40 at the end of it” (C1)

SOCIAL WELFARE SYSTEM AND ELIGIBILITY

The complex nature of the social welfare system also acted as a deterrent for some respondents to start a course. For many living on social welfare payments and other supplementary payments there was a fear that if they were to start an FET course they would no longer qualify for their social welfare benefits and payments.

“The main barrier is financial: no one wants to do a course and their money cut and be put onto another scheme and not qualify and lose their rent allowance” (D1)

There appeared to be a disconnect for many people between information from social welfare and the individual FET colleges and training centres regarding entry requirements and eligibility.

“social welfare were talking about a java course...as soon as I went in they told me ‘oh you’re not eligible for that’” (D1)

“it seems like somebody who doesn’t know the answer is passing you to somebody who doesn’t know the answer” (D1)

Particular schemes also have eligibility requirements that prospective learners found confusing:

“because I was getting rent allowance I wasn’t entitled to any money...I was basically doing it for voluntary” (D3)

“I thought you had to be on social welfare to go to FÁS” (G2)

Among the participants in the groups, there was some confusion regarding entitlements while engaging in FET courses, particularly for motivated individuals who were trying to apply for courses themselves.

EXPENSE OF COURSES

FET courses were perceived as being prohibitively expensive for many unemployed prospective learners. Respondents spoke of the struggle to make ends meet without adding additional costs associated with education and training.

“Even €200 [a week] is hard to live off... [when you consider all living expenses including] rent, food” (C1)

Some people had not been approached by social welfare to start a course and viewed the price of courses as beyond the scope of their budgets.

“€500 is a lot of money” (D2)

In addition, some prospective learners felt that affiliated costs such as travel and lunch etc. were not acknowledged as adding a financial burden to them. Additional “hidden costs” were discussed as problematic by many, with no warning if expensive equipment, books or supplies would be needed.

“You have to pay for everything” e.g. hairbrushes, makeup (D2)

“I had to pay €600 for my kit” – asked if could pay it off and they said no “you have to have it, you’re doing the course” (G2)

Learners felt that the interview would be the right time to let them know that costs would be affiliated with a course. Some felt that they were not told this as they were being 'sold' the course to fill required numbers.

CHILDCARE AND TRANSPORT

For many female respondents, the birth of a child reduced their capacity to engage in full time formal education. Whether female respondents were highly motivated or not, childcare presented an overwhelming barrier. Several women spoke about courses that they thought about starting, ceasing the application process once they had priced childcare costs.

"I did find courses that would suit me but it came down to hours with me having kids and I couldn't find anyone to mind them and I couldn't afford to have them in childcare" (D3)

"I wanted to do a course and for the baby to go in for 3 days it was €180" (D3)

These mothers remarked that part-time morning course would be easier for 'people with kids', and would not interfere with school collection times:

"if it was all day I'd be stuck because I have 3 school runs...even if the school could do afterschool clubs...it would give you more time" (D3)

While evening courses were not seen as providing more flexibility since they would ensure that childcare was needed:

"With an evening course then I'd have 3 kids to get minded" (D3).

ORGANISATIONAL BARRIERS

ORGANISATION OF COURSES

Some respondents felt that there was not a great range of courses in FET, with an over-emphasis on IT. Some felt that this reduced the options for people who were not interested in desk-based jobs *"I'm not built for sitting in an office" (D1)*. Similarly, one person that dropped out of a beauty course found that there was too strong an emphasis on theory:

"found that it was not the main things that I wanted to do; then I found that I could have done these separately...It has theory and science bits and I didn't like it" (G1).

There was a sense from many participants that they wanted practical courses instead of theory or assignments:

"I had no interest in the theory...that was one of the reasons I dropped out" (C1)

“the size of the books puts you off; you know you aren’t going to be able to learn all the theory. Some people are good at learning the theory, some are better learning though practical work” (G1)

Numerous people that went back to education through FET remarked that they found assignments too difficult, feeling unprepared for academic work:

“assignments too hard for me...because I left school early” (G2)

When struggling with how to do assignments, people felt that there were no proper supports to enable them to learn the appropriate methods of completing these course requirements:

“I was too self-conscious to ask for help...I done it once, but I couldn’t do it for every assignment” (G2)

Respondents felt that they needed some support and to be taught how to do an assignment, which is difficult in mixed age and ability classes *“you don’t even know how to lay out an assignment...show you what our kids already know” (G2)*. Other respondents also talked about the challenge of presenting in front of a class *“I didn’t pass a section of the course because I had to read out, I had it written down but I couldn’t read it out – too anxious” (G2)*.

Respondents also had differing views over whether there should be more full or part-time courses. In general, older respondents with families felt that full time courses would require too much time away from their families *“if I was to do them I’d never see my family”*. However, views on part-time provision differed since childcare (see previous section) was also an issue. However, some younger respondents felt like full time courses made sense *“just to get it out of the way” (G1)*. Respondents reported feeling like there was scope for beginning courses at other times of the year, as one may have to wait a long time from deciding to do a course and being able to apply or start: *“they should let you in each term” (g1)*.

WORK PLACEMENT

For the most part, participants were interested in work experience or placements and felt that they were a good idea. In fact, for courses without placements, learners would have liked hands on experience since numerous respondents spoke of employers looking for experience:

“when it comes down to it the courses don’t benefit you because you don’t have experience...when it comes to employers...if you want experience you have to be willing to give people experience” (D2)

One respondent mentioned completing several certificates (forklift, safe pass, manual handling) but was having no success in finding a job due to employer requirements for experience; *“need 6 months or a year experience”* (D1). The short amount of work experience respondents did take part in, as part of their course, was considered inadequate for employers. One barrier around work experience was that FET colleges left it to individual students to procure the placement which was a challenge, particularly outside Dublin:

“never told you you’d have to get work experience and they didn’t tell you how hard it would be to find work experience” (G1)

Learners also felt that there should be more oversight regarding the quality of placements to ensure that students were getting meaningful experience, with some onus on the college to ensure there are good quality work experience placements available:

“trained in there and cleaned a few machines... let me do my own thing...didn’t really teach me anything” (G2).

“courses could get more involved in work placements and work experience” (C1)

Particularly in the more vocational jobs there was hope that work placement might have resulted in a job, or interview, which was not necessarily the case. One mature student said the experience was *“very disheartening...feel they probably want the younger generation”* (G2).

INSTRUCTORS

The experiences of educators in FET courses varied greatly with some reporting positive experiences of highly engaged and enthusiastic instructors, and others that were not as positive. Unfortunately for those who had a negative instructor experience, the effect was to deter them from pursuing further education or training:

“it’s put me off for another year or two” (D2)

While others had a perception that the educators did not care about the classes

“We had a teacher who never showed up to the classes...she didn’t even notify you...I don’t think they [the instructors] take it seriously” (G1).

Some previous FET learners had a perception that teaching the FET programmes is ‘drawing the short straw’. A barrier perceived by former FET learners was the lack of support available from tutors or principals

“I went to the principal...they don’t give you enough information and they don’t give you enough support ... you are expected to work as fast as the smartest people; which is impossible.” (G1)

PROGRESSION

Some former FET students discussed the potential pathway to HE after FET. However, it was viewed as being too expensive *“too much pressure financially”*, while others felt like the academic requirements would be beyond them *“knew it would be too hard”*. Several former FET students identified the challenges of progressing to employment after a course and felt that it would be helpful to get some help after finishing a course:

“you have your qualification but what do you do with it then?...are they gonna sit you down and help you with a few appointments for job interviews” (D3)

“it would be nice to see at the end someone helping you to find a job or setting up your own thing but it seems that once the course is finished that’s really it” (D3)

Former students also felt that employers that take on students for work experience should express more interest in possibly taking students on after work experience

“you’re in doing work experience and they’ve no interest in you” (G2).

INFORMATIONAL AND GUIDANCE BARRIERS

Respondents awareness of courses and sources of information regarding FET was relatively limited. Many still referred to FET as ‘FÁS courses’ and colleges. There was little awareness of SOLAS:

“never even head of that” (D1)

“I think even people in it talk about it as FÁS” (G1).

Those who had never done a course felt like they had limited knowledge of courses:

“in my head, it’s just studying, essays, boring; nothing fun like what you were saying”

and did not know where to source information

“wouldn’t know where to start looking”.

When looking up information respondents suggested that the terms used were too complex:

“they don’t make it obvious, they use too detailed English”,

making information hard to access. People also felt that the emphasis on the websites was wrong:

“too much information on the wrong things and little on right things”.

One person mentioned the importance of outreach to individuals who might not source information independently:

“if you’re stuck in a rut won’t look for information”.

Many people only received information about courses through social welfare

“I got letters off the social welfare telling me about further education and training or open days that are going on” (D1)

However, information from social welfare was seen in a negative light since recipients of these letters felt like they were being threatened and that the information was insufficient to make you want to do a course

“always a threat at the end of it” (D1)

“if there’s a negative buzz on it, it puts you in a negative mind frame” (D1).

People who had been contacted about courses through social welfare also had a certain amount of scepticism about the quality of the courses on offer

“they just want numbers to turn up to courses” (D1)

“if you don’t have anything they’ll just throw you into the first thing that’s there”

The way in which courses were framed was viewed as very important. Respondents agreed that if social welfare contacted them and told them about the employment prospects, they would be much more likely to participate

“if you were told if you do this course, there’s a 90% chance you’ll get a job you’d think alright I’ll do that then” (D1).

Respondents were interested in more active forms of information, with interaction and guidance. Some felt that tailoring the service offering to their needs and interests could be accomplished through a support system such as that currently being rolled out through the JobPath programme. This could include the allocation of a personal adviser, conducting an initial assessment, the development of a Personal Progression Plan, and conducting ongoing reviews throughout the course. It could even be extended beyond the course itself to support the individual in accessing either further education or employment by using their new qualification to its maximum affect.

“It is a bit intimidating...might see posters, but doesn’t really seem that accessible...If you could talk to someone about it to break it down [that would help]” (C1)

Some people also mentioned starting courses that they had heard of through word of mouth:

“My uncle knew a friend that last year did this course and there was the same course being repeated...I would never have heard about it”, (C2)

Open days were largely viewed positively and would be inclusive and attractive to prospective learners:

“don’t think you’d have enough information from the computer alone, you’d need an open-day or something” (C1)

There was a suggestion that open days might also attract people who are unhappy in their jobs and could be an opportunity for them to reskill or upskill.

EDUCATORS

One group of educators was held to capture their perspectives and the challenges that they face in the implementation of their courses. The groups were all dedicated professionals who were recruited independently by Amárach to take part in the research.

FET educators spoke about the changing role of FET from education and enabling students to progress to third level towards an emphasis on progression to work. Educators felt that this change had occurred as a strategic objective for SOLAS. In addition, educators felt pressure in their courses to enable progression to the labour market

“pressure coming from QQI – modules they’re focused on getting students into workplace”

This has created a change in emphasis at the institutional and organisational level where colleges and educators are expected to teach courses which focus on labour market progression.

However, educators felt that this was not consistent across sectors. There has also been significant advancement made in creating greater linkages with Higher Education institutes in Ireland including advanced entry options for FET graduates:

“everyone is not singing from same hymn sheet in terms of what they want from our courses”.

Educators also suggested that there were practical issues in progressing students from lower level courses directly to the labour market. They mentioned the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) and Intreo emphasised courses which are aimed at training the learners to be directly employable:

“any of the courses that are funded it’s very much about getting them back to work”

Yet the practicalities of the labour market meant that educators felt that there should be a greater emphasis on completing higher level courses *“to sustain a good level of employment”*. They felt that there was a dichotomy between the governmental emphasis on labour force activation and the realities of a job market *“where a degree is a minimum requirement”* for many jobs.

For educators teaching lower level courses, e.g. QQI levels 3 and 4, they felt that many learners would not have the capabilities to continue onto third level. However, there were criticisms of the courses offered and their propensity to enable graduates to enter the workforce:

“Some of lower level courses; they’re supposed to be helping people getting back to work but they’re quite stale.”

“Sounds great on paper but has very little real weight”

Traditionally, FET educators felt that their role was the provision of *“more opportunities for people to access education”* both for school leavers and people hoping to upskill, retrain or enter the labour market by returning to education. Educators also spoke about the way in which FET has been used as a springboard into third level, enabling those who did not get the points to continue the career trajectory that they desire. Therefore, educators who took part in this research from FE colleges reported viewing their role as providing the education and skills required to enable students to progress into higher education.

MOTIVATION/DISPOSITIONAL BARRIERS

Educators felt that the perception and profile of FET was a barrier for students to consider FET as an option. Educators felt that the information was not being provided in school and that a *“certain element of snobbery around FET”* exists. Some reported their students feeling stigmatised for doing a FET course despite the potential for graduates to progress into Higher Education.

Student motivation was the single most important factor for student retention and attainment on courses. Having a clear progression pathway provides motivation to both achieve and engage in courses whether it is to the workplace or HE:

“if people can see themselves in some sort of trajectory then the motivation to engage can be very clear as well”.

It was suggested that the interview with the candidate was a very important way to assess motivation, with one educator remarking that asking why prospective students chose to apply to this course over another can yield the most interesting insights

“sometimes the students just like the title of the course...could be completely different in some cases”.

Educators spoke of the challenges that existed in ensuring that students meet entry level requirements for the course, in terms of motivation and ability. One educator mentioned that it had been easier to ensure that students were equipped for a course and sufficiently interested when they interviewed prospective students themselves but that due to administrative changes that was no longer feasible. Interviews were a key means for ensuring sufficient information was provided to students to ensure that they started the right course for them but this “*depends who’s interviewing students at the start of the year*”. The interview was viewed as a way to assess ability and motivation as well as asking questions, since prospective students may have all the information “*but you can’t leave it at that*”. Assessing prior learning and skills as well as the ability to learn was a fundamental aspect of the interview since “*you’ll have students who fly...but you have to work with the whole class*”.

Another educator mentioned a shift in learners’ expectations of educators, with some learners expecting the teacher or instructor to make everything fun and interesting:

“I find that as a teacher now there’s more of an expectation that we’re performers...making everything interesting, which is important but not everything I’m going to cover is going to be earth shattering”.

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL WELFARE BARRIERS

Educators spoke at length about eligibility requirements for various subsidised and social welfare schemes including supplementary payments; e.g. ‘VTOS and Back to Education Programme’. It became evident that at the educator level there was also a lack of clarity around the schemes available and what they offered potential candidates. Further, different colleges had different interpretations on an administrative level as to what the requirements were. This reflects the confusion felt by prospective learners surrounding entitlements and eligibility requirements and suggests a need for greater clarity and transparency regarding the interaction between FET and DSP/Intreo.

Some of the schemes linked with social welfare and Intreo to enhance employability were good in theory yet an educator felt that for many people returning to learning “*the curriculum is choking them*”. In addition, educators acknowledged that social welfare payments were too low to encourage or allow for prospective students to participate in full time education:

“very specific things like travel...childcare...the fact that there’s things like VTOS, BTE where you get €188 a week...its insufficient to attend college”.

The cost of courses, or additional costs presented challenges for many people. One educator mentioned that the principal helped students with payment plans but this was an exception and by no means a support across the board.

ORGANISATIONAL BARRIERS

ADMINISTRATIVE ISSUES

Educators outlined the issues associated with the organisation of the colleges within the ETBs including recruitment of students, course organisation and progression. Recruitment to courses is left at an individual college or individual course level, resulting in educators feeling that they are *“all in competition”*. Teachers outlined the pressure they felt to recruit students *“relying on teachers to recruit...I think a lot of its...recruit, recruit, recruit”*. There was a sense that there should be some overarching marketing strategy for ETBs, since educators felt that colleges were being held to different standards *“there are different rules for different colleges”*; *“depends on principals and their pull”*.

Educators felt pressure to recruit even unsuitable students for courses based on administrative demands regarding retention of courses. Educators mentioned the *“threat of redeployment”*, which resulted in unsuitable students being accepted for courses:

“you will take on people if you’re being threatened that your course is going to be cut”.

They felt that this had negative ramifications for students, saying that they are *“being set up to fail...because those seats need to be filled”*. Educators acknowledged the struggle for students who might be on courses to which they are unsuited: *“they’re not going to get their distinctions if they’re in the wrong place”*; yet felt that the marketing strategy had a key role to play regarding getting the information to the suitable students that would benefit. Educators also mentioned that this pressure is more salient for certain academic areas over others since some courses will always be full.

ORGANISATION OF COURSES

Educators in many places felt that curricula were too prescriptive, hindering the ability of educators to adapt a course based on the ability and aptitudes of the class *“I think a lot of education is crippled by curriculum”*. Educators spoke of the issues of ensuring that the class could keep up *“course they’re being sold aiming to get them a job but the curriculum is choking them”*. In many cases educators spoke of the disconnect between the way courses were marketed in comparison to the reality. Many spoke about the issue of incoming students who were not anticipating the levels of theory-based learning and volume of assignments.

They also perceived a lack of routes for progression from the lower QQI level courses (e.g. level 3 and 4) to the higher level (QQI level 5 and 6) FET colleges. Educators felt that lower level courses were unhelpful *“a week of interview skills would be worth 5 years of employability skills”*, with few opportunities for people to progress *“for the people that wouldn’t make that academic grade [level 5] ...they’re doing the course to go nowhere”*.

Educators had a lot of confusion regarding the progression requirements for VTOS funding. One educator bemoaned the inability for students to do VTOS over two years *“have to get an award after one year”*, although this was disputed by another member of the group *“they don’t have to”*. This reflects prospective students’ worries and confusion regarding entitlements when they do a course.

PROGRESSION

Many of the educators spoke of their links with HE/IOTs and spoke of options regarding advanced entry. However, at lower levels this was seen to be more problematic for students, with educators speaking of the large jumps from one level to another *“can be a big jump from level 5 to level 6 if you’re doing QQI”*. As with VTOS, there was disagreement amongst educators regarding students’ abilities to complete a second course at the same level: colleges appeared to have different progression requirements.

INFORMATIONAL BARRIERS

MARKETING FET

Educators spoke of the challenge of marketing FET, particularly to post-primary school students. One educator spoke of going around to schools and realising that students were not being encouraged to consider FET as an alternative option

“obvious in some cases that guidance wasn’t suggesting FET”.

They spoke of the challenge in creating and disseminating a positive profile of FET where people had awareness of the progression routes and benefits of completing FET courses:

“information and selling the fact that it’s another route to higher education”.

Many of the colleges had organised open days in their individual colleges yet when one educator surveyed their current students *“very few people in the course came to the open day”*. One spoke of the challenges to realistically represent courses in open days, stating that tester days or time shadowing would be better representations. However, when shadowing was explored as an option the logistics proved too cumbersome.

Many of the FE colleges also mentioned attending 3rd level fairs but found it hard to attract attention. There was a difference in opinion about marketing, since many felt that FET and ETBs needed some more cohesive marketing to raise awareness of the FET sector; yet one person remarked that there *“should be some duplicity really”* since individual colleges can have different courses while they are *“all in competition”* to fill courses.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Other educators mentioned that in certain cases eligibility requirements were relaxed for students and that mixed messages could be communicated to educators in terms of the

levels expected for students to pass and/or complete a course. One educator mentioned that their course layout incorporated continuous assessment, deadlines for which they were told to be strict about, yet at the same time they were asked to admit a student through the social welfare system so late into the course that the student would have technically failed had the same standards been applied. Inherent problems also existed around supports for students, since students may not disclose learning difficulties. Although this provides autonomy around disclosure for individuals, educators saw this as *“a major problem”*, since learners were missing out on available supports. When students then began to struggle, educators could be unaware:

“it’s not like secondary school where they’re assigned this help, they have to go looking for it”.

Another educator spoke about the challenges of mature students who had never been diagnosed with learning difficulties:

“A mature student mightn’t necessarily know they have a learning difficulty because they haven’t been assessed...first assignment...only then it comes out”.

All the educators felt that there should be more one-to-one guidance and support and they felt that they aimed to provide it. However, in all cases this needed proactive help seeking by students:

“think there’s a certain amount of responsibility with the student as well...I would always say if you have an issue come to me, don’t disappear”.

Educators also felt that undue pressure was put on staff to ensure that courses were filled with negative implications for students *“being set up to fail...because those seats need to be filled”* since educators were encountering threats of course cancellations and redeployment if their courses were not sufficiently full. In some cases, they said that this may have led to students being in courses to which they were not suited without the forewarning or guidance that they may have liked to have given.

INFORMATION PROVISION VS COURSE REALITIES

Educators spoke of the problems with communicating the realities of course content and curricula. In some places, they felt that courses were advertised on college websites in a misleading way to prospective students. Information provision and ensuring people have the right information and are in the right course was a key challenge for educators:

“Some people see the word computer and think they want to do it”.

Similarly, educators had experienced a lack of informed students who were referred into courses from Intreo with students arriving ill-informed and unprepared *“they sleepwalk onto a course”*.

Looking at education in its wider societal context, educators remarked on the role for FET to have in equality and social inclusion.

“Education is about equality really isn’t it, it’s the mechanism by which to equalise a society as much as we can”

It was evident that many of the educators felt constrained by the curricula, when they would prefer to emphasise the personal growth and social inclusion aspects of FET:

“there’s a massive social inclusion element to FET as well which is really critical to it all...students coming from working class backgrounds, 90, 95, almost 100%...and people from outside Ireland as well... I think if we can be aware of that as educators...to make the students aware that what they’re doing is really worthwhile even if they don’t end up pursuing that particular course...the very fact that they’re engaging in education”.

EMPLOYERS

As with the educators group, employers were viewed as important contributors to the discussion about FET. The employers who participated had differing levels of experience and knowledge of FET: some had no experience of FET; some had employed people with FET; some sent employees for FET training; while others had completed FET training themselves.

For those who had employed FET graduates, there were mixed experiences, which seemed to be person-related as opposed to training *“mixed success, about 50%, some people just don’t work out”*. One employer remarked that they did not think FET qualifications made a huge difference for roles

“when I think FETAC I think nursing homes... does FETAC have a huge relevance to me, no, someone could be coming from a local college through our HR...but at the end of the day we interview the person”.

Several employers also had experience of FET students on work placements in their businesses. One employer found this a useful and effective strategy to observe potential future employees. Due to regulatory requirements, several employers had to ensure that staff had completed FET qualifications at levels 5 or higher *“I use it because I have to”*.

One employer took on apprentices and found that the employees they took on were well motivated and worked harder than previous generations of apprentices

“at the minute, we have 4 going through that process...we’ve four very good young guys”

He felt that the quality of apprenticeship training seemed to be down to individual tutors with the feedback from apprentices being very good.

MOTIVATION/DISPOSITIONAL BARRIERS

Employers' perspectives on motivations were quite varied with discussion centring around generational differences. Employers in general felt that young people had an expectation of finding a job that they wanted which may not be the reality in the jobs market:

"might not be the job they want but they can get a job"

"how do you ingrain a work ethic?".

Several employers felt that education and FET should work on instilling a want and need to progress, but recognised that this would be a challenge.

ECONOMIC BARRIERS

Employers discussed the benefits of subsidies and work placements for employing people they would not traditionally offer jobs. Work placements were seen very positively as it provided an opportunity to assess the abilities of potential employees without financial risk on their part.

ORGANISATIONAL BARRIERS

Within FET and the education system employers felt that there was not enough progress or movement in line with the jobs market. There were also worries about the quality and standards within FET colleges or 'FETAC colleges' as they were more commonly referred. Employers felt that there should be higher quality and more rigorous standards applied *"when I did FETAC it was sit down lads, relax"* as well as greater external monitoring *"supposed to be moderated by QQI but that's not the reality"*. In line with worries about quality there was a feeling that people were passing FET courses that have not met minimum requirements. This resulted in scepticism about the quality of the qualifications achieved. Some employers queried the quality of teaching although others felt that this was an issue encountered at all levels of education *"it's like in school, you can get a good teacher or a bad teacher"*; *"like the colleges...we'd one or two shockers in the university sectors"*. However, the perception that quality and standards are inconsistent is worrying in the context of progression to employment; employers are far less likely to employ graduates whose qualifications they feel they cannot trust.

Organisationally, employers felt that FET colleges should be reaching out to employers both for work placements and progression routes. Employers were positive about courses with work placement, feeling that there *"needs to be a degree of hands on experience"*. They mentioned that work placements have a host of associated benefits, including students

gaining experience, which leads to better interviews, while employers get a chance to see how they work and it doesn't cost anything. However, employers mentioned that work placements should be meaningful and lengthy enough to provide proper training and experience.

One employer felt that the requirement of 100 hours of work experience for healthcare was much too low since that only equates to 2½ weeks of experience. In contrast, another employer provided 13 weeks of work placement which was monitored and evaluated by the college, employer and students alike. This was positively received since the FET college was ensuring that the placement was working with everyone involved.

INFORMATIONAL/GUIDANCE BARRIERS

Employers felt that not enough advertising or awareness existed of the FET sector. There was a suggestion that there should be collaboration between colleges, with one central website *"our HR people could link into"*. The employers that had experience with FET had been reached out to by either individual colleges or other stakeholders. One person was contacted directly by a FET college regarding work experience *"we want to place people"*. Another person had been invited to a careers fair and recruited *"three lads through an expo up in [location]"*. A third employer had received a call from social welfare to go to a jobs expo when looking for staff but found it unhelpful since too many people turned up *"there were thousands"* many of whom they felt were unsuitable for the job requirements.

Looking at the role of FET in the wider societal context, employers questioned the education system in general and its relevance to the labour market:

"It fundamentally goes back to our education system...how far has the education system progressed since we were in school...are we teaching them the right skills?"

There was also a sense that FET could be situated in the third level sector in a more meaningful way, that allowed for individuals to graduate with FET qualifications that are recognised and valued to the same degree as universities or college:

"If we ended up with a more Germanic model where there's space in third level, not necessarily university or college, that is going to cater for an individual's capability...but could end up in a role that suits their ability or life passion...that isn't demeaned [because it isn't university]"

Contextualising FET with universities and colleges, one employer suggested that FET should receive more funding. There was also a sense across FET and third level that qualifications were becoming less meaningful since universities *"bring them in to pass...it's a train station"*, while the *"drop-out rate is huge"*.

The employer group, for the most part, felt that they would be happy to employ someone with a FET qualification, with numerous characteristics and traits seen as more important

than a university qualification. Some employers also saw the social inclusion component of FET as linking well with their Corporate Social Responsibility *“a lot of them haven’t had opportunities and we like to give them an opportunity”*.

However, some employers had little confidence about the skills acquire by FET graduates *“still be sceptical”*, feeling that there were probably FET graduates that should not have received a qualification *“had all her FETAC levels but wouldn’t let her mind a cat”*. Several employers remarked that they *“would love to know the failure rate”* in individual courses. One employer also spoke of the differing accreditation standards between the QQI in Ireland and the levels required in the UK. One employer who had completed a FET course themselves said that they had a *“mixed opinion of it”* since they had completed a QQI level 5 course which involved attending *“all we had to do was show up”* compared to equivalent level courses which they knew included multiple modules and assignments.

Key points in this chapter

- *A range of stakeholders chosen by SOLAS engaged in interviews regarding their perspectives of the current offering of FET and the barriers they perceived for prospective learners.*
- *Motivational and dispositional barriers perceived by stakeholders included age, psychological barriers including mental health problems and motivation, confidence and self-esteem, and the socio-cultural background of prospective learners.*
- *Economic and social welfare barriers perceived by stakeholders included entitlements and the relative confusion surrounding entitlements, and costs affiliated with courses.*
- *Stakeholders mentioned several organisational barriers including the funding of FET, accessibility and eligibility requirements for courses, course design and delivery including work placements and/or experience, perceptions of the quality of FET provision and the potential of progression to higher education or employment.*
- *Information and guidance barriers mentioned by stakeholders included the relative lack of transparent, quality and accessible information and a perception that guidance within school did not consider FET while guidance was inaccessible once external to the education system.*
- *Stakeholders also made several suggestions for the strategic direction and evolution of FET, including an emphasis on clarity of remit and dissemination and marketing.*

CHAPTER 5: STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

INTRODUCTION

The FET sector remit spans several government departments, state bodies and semi-state organisations, charities and third sector organisations, and other stakeholders as described in Chapter 2. How these stakeholders are engaged with each other and their contribution to FET is discussed through the results of the interviews. This provided insights into the barriers to FET as perceived by the stakeholders, and the role and challenges of FET at the

It should be noted that the opinions presented throughout this chapter represent participants in the focus groups, and while they may or may not be factually accurate, they do represent their experiences.

institutional and communication levels.

BACKGROUND TO THE MAIN STAKEHOLDERS IN FET

Funding and overseeing FET falls under the remit of several government departments, including the Department of Education and Skills (DES), Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (DJEI) and Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER). The DES has the primary responsibility for education policy from early childhood education to universities. SOLAS manage, co-ordinate and support the delivery of this Further Education and Training by the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). Therefore, the role of the DES is to deliver funding to SOLAS to carry out its duties. Consequently, the DES has a role in the derivation of policy and funding of FET.

The primary responsibility of the DJEI is jobs. The roles of FET and Higher Education includes employment through the provision of a skilled workforce which is relevant to the needs of the economy is, however, recognised in their remit.

Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI) and Higher Education Authority (HEA) have an important role in promoting access routes from FET to HE.

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) monitor sectoral and industry skills needs and report to both the DJEI and DES to inform the direction of post-secondary education.

With the establishment of SOLAS and the ETBs, the DSP has an important role in informing and guiding jobseekers into FET through the Intreo service. The DSP also determines welfare supports and allowances for learners in the FET sector¹⁴.

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) also has some involvement in supports for FET, a nearly free childcare service is available for learners on certain courses, but the eligibility of courses is decided by DES.

The DPER have the responsibility for the level of funding allocated to the FET sector.

When asked, stakeholders outlined numerous challenges faced by the FET sector. The main challenges outlined include: the profile of FET; pathways from FET; organisational issues for FET/ETBs; challenges specific to rural areas; access, provision, quality and clarity around programmes offered; and challenges faced by the learners themselves.

These are explored under the four main themes (motivational/dispositional, economic/social welfare, organisational and information and guidance barriers) below.

¹⁴ <https://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Back-to-Education-Supports.aspx>

MOTIVATIONAL/DISPOSITIONAL BARRIERS

Stakeholders discussed a range of barriers which may impact prospective learners' dispositions and motivations towards FET, including age, confidence, mental health difficulties or addiction, negative experiences of education, familial engagement with education, social supports, perceived profile of FET and other motivational issues. Psychological barriers may or may not be obvious or known to individuals themselves, are pervasive, and consequently difficult to address.

AGE

The age of prospective learners can have a big impact on motivation and dispositions towards FET. Younger people on social welfare without dependents may not feel the economic motivation to return to education, while younger lone parents may be overcoming too many challenges to see the benefit of taking on full time education. In contrast, older cohorts have different motivations and frames of reference regarding education. Older learners with poor basic skills may feel fear or shame about starting education again. A lack of confidence or self-esteem arose frequently as a barrier perceived by stakeholders. Low self-efficacy beliefs around learning, or a lack of confidence in their capabilities was seen a big barrier; particularly where the individual was the first in the family to consider further education:

“confidence and self-esteem issue aspect of not being able to achieve or never going to get anywhere anyway or what’s the point of putting all that work in.” (stakeholder 38)

One stakeholder felt that there are structural impacts on learners' self-esteem and self-efficacy beliefs around learning:

“the biggest barrier is the parity of esteem – we’ve got an education system that defines educational attainment in terms of CAO points particularly for young people and it tends to value one type of educational experience over others” (stakeholder 21)

PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS

A stakeholder mentioned that a core aim of FET should be to build confidence around learning capabilities. Mental health difficulties were suggested as a common root cause of disengagement and people struggling with mental health problems may find the concept of FET overwhelming:

“huge issues around motivation and mental health primarily with younger people...like a vicious circle, when there’s a mental health issue the confidence drops

and anything outside the norm becomes terrifying...also linked to their sense of what's available to them" (stakeholder 4).

Addiction issues were mentioned as a barrier that needs to be addressed prior to starting FET (stakeholder 8, 10). People should be ready to start a course; basic and bridging courses encouraging people and building confidence around education may be necessary for certain learners for whom case officers are hesitant to encourage into full time FET courses *"don't want to set them up to fail"* (stakeholder 8).

Motivation, confidence and self-esteem were recognised as psychological challenges for prospective learners. Some stakeholders mentioned that education, and FET should aim to increase self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as building socialisation skills where necessary. One stakeholder mentioned a concern that the focus on education to improve peoples' lives and communities seems lost (stakeholder 10).

"the one concern that we would have, [is] that [if] there's a loss of focus on ... getting everybody into work, you lose the focus on education for education's sake". (stakeholder 10)

However, a course provider mentioned looking at the wider socio-cultural impacts of courses:

"the wider benefits of learning model...to see can we capture some of that information...that real personal, self-confidence, self-esteem, active citizenship...to show the benefits of learning that maybe are not shown on a certificate" (stakeholder 3).

FRAMING

Many stakeholders mentioned having negative prior experiences of education, including experiences of FET as a barrier to engagement for prospective learners: *"the experiences in education has a massive impact on FET...I hate school or I never liked school or I was never good at school"* (stakeholder 38). For others, negative school experiences can result in poor educational attainment. One stakeholder suggested that an emphasis should be placed on experiential learning which would engage demotivated learners. For others, FET is co-located with post-primary education which acts as a strong deterrent to those who may have disengaged from the education process while in school within the same buildings.

Prospective learners who come from backgrounds with no tradition of school completion or a low value placed on education were considered less likely to be motivated to participate in an FET course. The value placed on education can be very low; a *"poverty of ambition"* (stakeholder 44) was mentioned by several stakeholders, while others mentioned value placed on child-rearing as much higher than learning or employment: *"job is to raise children"* (stakeholder 41). This was suggested to more often be the case with LTU, who may

have poor family supports as well as no tradition of employment within the family “grandfather didn’t work, father didn’t work, now I’m not going to work” (stakeholder 3).

Further, motivated individuals from families with no tradition of employment can face cumulative disadvantage, including an absence of a working role model within the family and/or community, and a lack of support:

“when you’re coming from a situation where people don’t work and you try to break that cycle it can be extremely challenging...The supports that you need to be successful - a lot of them are missing: from the home life, from the family unit” (stakeholder 3).

FET is seen by many as stigmatised or somewhere to go “If can’t do anything else” (stakeholder 17), “Employers, parents and learners [view FET] as poor alternative to 3rd level” (stakeholder 18). Again, the benefits of FET should be apparent to prospective learners, with obvious short term rewards as well as long term outcomes (stakeholder 35).

A perception that there will not be employment following a course, de-motivates individuals from taking up FET courses.

“why would I do a course if there is no work’...that’s changing because there is work, it’s far easier to sell the course now because there’s work behind it” (stakeholder 3)

Similarly, stakeholders in some rural areas mentioned that communities may not be aware of advantages associated with pursuing FET due to traditional farm roles.

Also, if an individual begins a course the importance of encouraging them in their pursuit of education and motivating them to through a supportive class environment and a positive engagement with their tutor is very important for retention within programmes.

FET, therefore, is challenged with framing education as relevant to those who may fall into the categories mentioned above, and ensuring that benefits accrue from participation and are apparent to potential learners (stakeholder 23).

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL WELFARE BARRIERS

Economic barriers are wide ranging and pose a significant challenge for even the most motivated prospective learner. Stakeholders cited several commonly encountered economic barriers, including social welfare allowances and entitlements for FET, the costs or availability of childcare and transport, and the additional costs of attending courses or progressing to HE. One stakeholder mentioned that the “ethos [of ETBs] is very much inclusion...when needs identified...resources may be the issue” (stakeholder 14)

ENTITLEMENTS

For some prospective learners, the real and immediate economic consequences of taking up further education or training are prohibitive to beginning courses. Even for those who retain allowances or benefits, respondents reported experiencing at least a one-week gap between losing jobseekers allowance payments and receipt of the SOLAS payment for training. Stakeholders discussed social welfare allowances and entitlements for taking up FET as both rigid and inconsistent, a precarious and uncertain position in which prospective learners can find themselves. Social welfare entitlements are complicated, and stakeholders reported a lot of confusion around benefits as well as discrepancies in eligible courses. Examples of their statements include:

“Job seekers wouldn’t allow people to do a two-year part-time course and retain benefit...Even though people were able to do the one-year full time version and retain benefit” (stakeholder 12).

“a medical admin course that in one place you got SOLAS training payment and in another had to apply for back to education” (stakeholder 9).

“Get SOLAS training allowance if entitled to social welfare... But for BTEA until you apply for BTE and have received a course place you don’t know if you will receive payment – may have started course and then have to leave because not entitled” (stakeholder 9).

Payments supports were viewed as too rigid and as a disincentive for learners to take up courses *“knocked at first hurdle”* (stakeholder 7). A main concern is that if one is to take up a course in education they will be ineligible for social welfare payments; there is the general assumption that only certain courses enable one to maintain one’s benefits while others do not. Some prospective learners may see themselves *“as better off on social welfare”* (stakeholder 3) where entitlements remain relatively known and static.

A challenge is also seen in engaging under 25 NEETs who have signed onto the live register. A stakeholder suggested that there is a perception that jobseekers allowance is *‘pocket money’* rather than a support to look for training or employment.

MIGRANT COMMUNITIES

Respondents also reported that representatives from migrant communities felt that they were unable to avail of FET due to social welfare restrictions.

There is limited knowledge of the possible contribution of FET and a perception of migrants in the labour force that to progress, you need 3rd level qualification. Further, stakeholders interviewed felt that there was an intergenerational challenge with migrants being caught in a *‘poverty trap’* where 3rd level was unaffordable for their children.

They also reported that this second generation would benefit from the new apprenticeship system as it provides post-secondary training as well as a salary.

CHILDCARE

Some stakeholders see the lack of ubiquitous childcare allowances and provision for learners across all programmes as one of the largest barriers facing adult learners.

The rigidity of the childcare allowance and the limited eligibility is a barrier for women. For those in receipt of the allowance, it does not cover full costs and learners also must contribute. Learners also noted how there are few on-site childcare facilities and limited information on childcare supports which are currently available for adult learners. Stakeholders reported that parents find the lone parent allowance very complicated, particularly once children reach 14 years. The complexity and lack of perceived accessibility of the lone parent allowance, therefore, has an impact on engagement in FET. FET needs to provide individuals with an answer to: *“what is going to make you leave your baby at home and go to education?”* (stakeholder 35)

TRAVEL

Travel allowance eligibility requirements means that only those travelling outside a 3-mile radius or doing day courses can benefit. However, the transport/travel allowance has not been increased in over 15 years which means that for many it does not cover transport costs. Travel expenses limit some learners’ ability to access courses due to overall costs.

In rural areas, accessing courses can be very difficult, with stakeholders feeling that specific travel allowances should be provided to all rural learners. In some rural areas, no public transport exists (stakeholder 6). However, transport barriers are not always just expense related, some individuals may not be confident enough to *“move outside [their] jurisdiction”* (stakeholder 8).

COURSE FEES

In some cases, it was reported, that stakeholders felt the costs of courses surpass available benefits or allowances. People who are reliant on social welfare may not have the disposable income to cover the cost of lunch and dressing smartly to attend a course.

Third level costs, for those who want to progress from FET, were also reported as barriers.

One stakeholder remarked that *“there’s the choice piece, where does the citizen and the choice come in...labour activation at minimum wage level for everybody or at what point does somebody have the choice to leave the labour market and go to try and achieve education...to upskill”* (stakeholder 38).

The cost of upskilling and engaging in training at this point may force individuals to remain in minimum wage job rather than seeking further education *“when you may have the educational ability to achieve more”* (stakeholder 38).

ORGANISATIONAL BARRIERS

Barriers arise in the institutional complexity of the organisation of FET. These include funding issues and strategic barriers, access, choice, delivery, accreditation and qualifications, course design, and subsequent progression to HE or employment.

FUNDING

Funding for education determines the organisation and provision of learning across the lifespan. In the case of FET funding impacts course provision, learner supports and facilities. Stakeholders mentioned the impact funding has on the method of delivery of course. This reduces flexibility and the capacity to respond to local learner needs.

For example, one stakeholder suggested that class-size limits need to be reviewed with a view to avoid overcrowding in classrooms to ensure learners are provided with sufficient levels of support and attention from tutors (stakeholder 6).

Funding provided to course providers for people with disabilities can also be tied to full time provision. Case officers encourage people to highlight any supports they need at the interview stage, yet this can result in course providers recommending lower level or bridging courses.

Vulnerable learners who need supports should have available supports to allow them to pursue FET without being deterred. One stakeholder suggested the presence of a mentor, or a visible point of contact might help increase retention on courses.

Stakeholders viewed some facilities as ‘run down’ and ‘requiring investment’. For example, one stakeholder mentioned the lack of fit-for-purpose facilities for hospitality courses within an FET colleges based in their area where an Institutes of Technology have facilities. Some stakeholders felt that the better use of educational resources across FE and HE would be beneficial, and benefit both the IT and the FET learners. This ties in closely with the suggestion from one respondent that making courses available on college, or IT, campuses could instil a sense of pride and add a further sense of value to the course for the FE learner, acting to improve the perceived value of FET among potential learners by anchoring it to HE.

Further, technology and Wi-Fi are often barriers to participation for learners, particularly those who are situated in rural locations. Lack of updated or available technology and limited Wi-Fi diminishes a learner’s ability to access course work (stakeholder 6).

ACCESSIBILITY AND ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

Funding in FET also has an impact on learning facilities. One stakeholder suggested that learning environments should be equipped with the necessary facilities and resources for both tutors and learners, and that courses must be offered in settings that are accessible and enticing for adult learners to help reduce barriers to participation (stakeholder 6). For example, it was suggested that buildings should be physically accessible for learners; one

stakeholder had an example of students realising buildings were inaccessible for physical disabilities yet were not told the same or a similar course was provided elsewhere:

“Dublin FET’s/ETB’s; Dublin has many buildings that are accessible. They have identical courses in the buildings that are accessible and those that are not accessible; they [FET] need to manage that. We have heard cases of students turning up to courses and then discovering that the course is on the third floor and they are in a wheelchair and can’t get up to it. This is while there is another identical course that is in a building which is accessible just down the road; it’s a matter of coordinating”. (Stakeholder 31)

Beyond physical accessibility, stakeholders felt that the general accessibility of courses was not comprehensive or transparent, and that eligibility requirements were too high. One stakeholder mentioned that learners were calling for the eligibility criteria for FET courses to be reviewed as this creates significant barriers to participation in FET, particularly in relation to age restrictions and length of time unemployed (stakeholder 6).

For example, for those that are out of school and/or education for over 10 years, confidence and self-efficacy beliefs around learning also becomes an issue. For older learners and those with literacy or numeracy difficulties, there can be the challenge of not having the basic skills required to do a vocational course, which may result in drop-out or non-achievement when there is embarrassment around highlighting inadequate skills. Many ETB courses require at least basic computer skills which acts as a large barrier for many people, particularly older prospective learners many of whom are not computer literate. A lack of computer skills prevents learners from starting courses, while basic computer skills courses are only available during the day, lengthening the time taken to achieve the qualification. Therefore, engaging potential participants who have the required level of education can be a challenge. Stakeholders felt there was an overemphasis on academic learning whereas a positive attitude, willingness to learn, and flexibility should be prerequisites for courses. These attributes also mirror what employers value most in their employees.

The recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a huge challenge for older prospective learners, LTU, early school leavers and migrants. Although learners may have the skills required for eligibility they may not have the certificate to prove it, and recognition of prior qualifications from outside the EU remains a key challenge for eligible migrants:

“People take it for granted when they come here they’re not going to have their qualifications recognised and they’re not going to have their experience recognised and they feel they have to start from zero again and that’s what happens” (stakeholder 34).

English language ability is another key challenge around accessibility of courses; especially for members of migrant communities. Ireland does not offer beginner or upskilling English

language classes on arrival. Although there may be local community education centres offering ESOL courses, they may be basic or beginners English language skills with no option for progressing to intermediate or advanced courses. Similarly, migrants may have good verbal skills but poor written skills so ESOL provision is not necessarily tailored towards the labour market. Providers felt that there is a good supply of ESOL courses *“we have fairly significant ESOL provision here...and the classes we provide are very well attended”* (stakeholder 3). English language classes are also more likely to be delivered during the day mid-week, reflecting the target audience of asylum seekers and those inactive in labour market: *“they’d be very specific programmes at local level meeting [the needs of] particular target groups”* (stakeholder 2). This does not allow for recent migrants in the labour market to upskill and leave the poverty trap of typically minimum wage, shift work employment. Places can also be limited on ESOL courses, so stakeholders felt that more intense provision of ESOL for recent migrants was necessary.

Accessibility can also be a challenge for people with disabilities. A stakeholder remarked that in Ireland, the role of parents of children with disabilities in supporting them in their educational attainment is critical. Parents assert themselves in these discourses and act as advocates for their children’s right to education:

“there isn’t a concrete, transparent pathway into further education and training that allows someone to make that decision when they’re 13, 14, 15 years of age, to decide that where I’m going to go and I know I’m going there and then build what skills they have in that timespan to get to that point...there’s nothing about that, it’s absolutely about filling the course...what does that mean in 2016 filling a course – I think it is the wrong perspective, the wrong approach, it is meaningless” (stakeholder 27)

Stakeholders also mentioned an organisational problem with foresight in that ETBs should be engaging with mainstream and special education schools to identify future needs e.g. in three years eight people in the catchment will be graduating school with autism and we will have a course for them. However, many course providers do engage with the national learning network and other special interest groups and rehabilitation centres to ensure supports and courses are there for learners with disabilities.

COURSE DESIGN AND DELIVERY

Stakeholders felt that oversight and strategy was needed in the design and delivery of courses. More national and regional planning would be welcomed by stakeholders to aid the navigation of the system and prevent perceived ‘provision overlaps’ or ‘gaps’ (stakeholder 4). It was felt that there has been *“a lack of strategy and analysis in determining the range and level of FET courses”* (stakeholder 18), and *“upskilling agenda needs to be balanced with the educational agenda”* (stakeholder 2). Course providers acknowledged the challenge of finding the balance between providing general education in a subject and an employment driven course (stakeholder 2). Providers felt that there should be both educationally driven

courses and employment driven courses to allow for progression based on the interests of the individual learner.

One stakeholder mentioned that learners were seeking consistent course choice to be provided across Ireland, removing rural gaps in FET provision. More availability and frequency of adult learning programmes need to be provided broadly across Ireland. In rural areas, there was mention of repetition of limited course choices annually with no new programmes. In contrast, few FET gaps were perceived in urban areas or Dublin apart from courses for younger males who would traditionally have taken up apprenticeships; there is room for the development of new manual or mechanical courses for non-academic males who may want to progress into apprenticeships in the future.

Many felt that lower level courses which target literacy, numeracy and digital provision for early school leavers/LTU are important; while others felt that provision needed to be more industry-focused addressing regional skills gaps. Regardless of perspective, stakeholders felt that there should be greater flexibility in the delivery of FET, such as greater provision and emphasis on part-time, evening and weekend courses. Course providers feel a lack of autonomy in providing courses:

“we’re stuck in the training centres and in the PLC system at level 5 and 6 with providing full time courses because they’re the rules and regulations of the funding stream that enables that programme to happen” (stakeholder 2)

Flexibility in delivery would help those with episodic conditions, e.g. MS, epilepsy, mental health difficulties, to build up certifications and courses over time on a module by module basis rather than dropping out of a course due to illness and start again the next year.

There was, however, some question regarding the practicalities of blended or online approaches for the typical FET cohort. For example, rural broadband issues would render self-directed online courses impractical, while learners requiring lower level courses may not have the skills or motivation to engage, self-teach or research online. Online or blended approaches would also not suit more practical, vocational courses and would remove the social interactions, team work and confidence building found in face-to-face programmes. However, there is scope to utilise already funded online programmes in course delivery. For example, WriteOn is a free online resource accredited by the QQI for literacy and numeracy which could help learners with literacy issues during ETB courses, yet few ETBs make use of it.

Many also felt that the link with the academic calendar is outmoded, as it limits the time for work-place learning which is a very important and useful aspect of courses and greatly enhances learners’ ability to progress. On the other hand, work placements were viewed as a barrier to learners with disabilities since employers can be put off by necessary accommodations. Similarly, migrant learners can struggle to find work placements –

discrimination was mentioned by several stakeholders. Courses were also felt to be too long, with learners confused by the length of courses which were available in shorter formats in private colleges. For example, one interviewee suggested that to become an accredited security guard through SOLAS programmes takes 8-10 weeks compared with a 1 week private course which provides the individual with the same accreditation (stakeholder 8).

The length of courses and reliance on full time courses also acts as a barrier for motivated lone parents who cannot afford childcare. In contrast, stakeholders mentioned that some specific cohorts of learners such as ESOL learners commented on the need for more teaching hours and support.

The upskilling and reskilling of FET instructors is also important. Partially because of the recruitment embargo, stakeholders felt that there is a misalignment between job vacancies in the economy and teacher knowledge. Stakeholders felt that jobseekers are looking for FET that will lead to employment, and there is an abundance of IT jobs yet few IT courses. Instead courses are *“teaching what can be taught”* (stakeholder 14). In addition, instructor expertise tends to be the younger cohort (<25 years) resulting in course delivery which may not be appropriate for older learners *“if you approach it like you would with a teacher teaching secondary or primary school, adults won’t respond to that in any shape or form”* (stakeholder 45). Appropriate modes of delivery depend on the age and demographic breakdown of FET cohorts: learners starting PLCs after the Leaving Certificate have different expectations and motivations compared with mature learners or LTU accessing courses.

“the learning methodologies that are used... to manage the new context we are in, the support includes continuous professional development for educators...People who are teaching adults now...there’s new qualifications for FET teachers, it’s important that a range of different skills are exhibited by educators” (stakeholder 6)

Quality of provision depends on incumbent teachers while stakeholders felt that there was little emphasis on upskilling or a CPD strategy (stakeholder 18). CPD would be welcomed regarding delivery methods which are appropriate for learners with disabilities or SEN since many instructors are not using universal design learning (UDL). The creation of new FET courses was also felt to be inflexible compared to the private sector; in industries where new qualifications were required stakeholders felt that too long a lag time existed. Currently, there is approximately a 9-month lag between identifying local employers’ skills needs and appropriate courses being available (stakeholder 9).

Programme inflexibility was also felt to be a challenge for learners since there is an inability to switch between programmes (e.g. BTEI and VTOS) if it emerges that a learner is unsuited to their original selection. This creates an immediate barrier to a learner’s participation and progression in FET. Course providers outlined the need for flexibility particularly regarding cultural issues reflecting the needs of the migrant communities:

“some people in the group could not participate with other people in the group so we had to work around that, try to provide different courses at different times, shorten some classes. So, for example, if we had a two-hour class sometimes we had to do one hour with one group and an hour with another group instead of doing a two-hour session” (stakeholder 3)

PERCEPTIONS OF QUALITY

The staff moratorium was also seen as a key challenge which has impacted course offerings, quality and support. Guidance services were also seen to suffer from the reduction in funding and the recruitment embargo. Stakeholders felt needs assessments for incoming students were inconsistent, while guidance levels were not allowing for an alignment of learners to courses. Stakeholders also felt that guidance needed to be increased for incoming or prospective learners considering FET via the Intreo service, since not all case officers seemed to be aware of the scope of courses or the suitability of individuals for courses. This was also reflected in discussions regarding the challenge of the complexity and diversity of different courses offered through FET; from Youthreach and VTOS to literacy programmes or apprenticeships. Overall, stakeholders felt that there was not enough clarity or guidance to navigate the system.

At an organisational level, stakeholders outlined numerous funding challenges. Facilities were viewed as unfit for purpose, with insufficient funding levels. Stakeholders felt there was a lack of consistency on course quality and funding of individual programmes. Course provision was seen by stakeholders as unsystematic, and eligibility requirements and eligibility for social welfare allowances were also unclear.

Stakeholders felt that FET is portrayed and perceived as an inferior second choice by the public for those who do not meet HE eligibility requirements. This diminishes the relative value of FET as a choice for potential learners.

Many stakeholders felt that while quality varies across ETB's and courses, there is an unfounded perception that FET is viewed as a second where to go option if a student does not meet eligibility requirements for HEIs:

“FET tends to be second best, second option and doesn't enjoy that sort of parity of esteem” (stakeholder 21)

“clear hierarchy...people do further ed. [sic] if they can't get anything else” (stakeholder 17)

Stakeholders viewed quality as inconsistent across courses. Some reported course graduates as not necessarily meeting education goals: *“a multitude of certificates does not equal education”* (stakeholder 43). One stakeholder felt that the work placements on courses were not necessarily good quality, and graduates remained unprepared for the workplace. This compounded employers’ perception of FET as not adequately preparing employees for the workplace. In the current climate, these progression issues were compounded by the competition for jobs with HEI graduates. Some stakeholders also felt that there was a challenge to link with employers during courses, since many employers did not meet the requirements of SOLAS for work placements. Stakeholders felt that increased engagement was needed with employers, both to ensure that programmes meet their needs and to enhance employer’s awareness of the value of QQI accredited qualifications.

Clear validation and recognition is needed for FET. One stakeholder mentioned that the QQI inherited the quality system and therefore had little autonomy regarding its creation. However, new initiatives such as FIT are working on the perceptions of FET quality within industry. FIT was involved with the QQI in the establishment of new technology-related awards which are perceived well within the sector.

Stakeholders acknowledged the importance of accreditation to be able to stand over a course and allow for transparency for employers. However, accredited programmes should not be the only qualification that is available in FET. Instead if a learner cannot meet the accreditation level, learning achieved until this point should be acknowledged e.g. passport system so don’t have to redo skills/courses (stakeholder 27).

“We have large numbers of people in the ETBs as learning services who are either not being offered accreditation for their learning or...they’re offered it at the point of entry...and it’s not explained to them...there’s a gap there I think between the structural availability of qualifications through the qualifications framework and actually what happens in practice. At the moment, I don’t think we are giving people a genuine opportunity to recognise and validate their skills. There’s practically no recognition of prior learning across Further Education and Training...especially at the lower levels and despite years of effort to bridge that gap it hasn’t been taken forward sufficiently with any consolidated approach to it” (stakeholder 5)

Similarly, the ability to do FET on a module basis would facilitate employees to engage with training while in the workforce. The QQI shift toward major awards makes on-the-job training difficult when employees should be able to build minor awards into major awards (stakeholder 22). As this is currently available in some circumstances, this reflects a lack of awareness among stakeholders of the availability of this option.

PROGRESSION

There is no available data on the experiences of individual students or their progression to either HE or employment. This represents a deficit in the capacity to monitor progression pathways with stakeholders outlining challenges regarding evaluation of programmes.

Stakeholders also suggested that the limited knowledge and awareness of the new structures of SOLAS and ETBs represent challenges to engagement by their constituents. Further, the complexity of the system and the diversity in course provision provides a barrier to increasing awareness.

For courses, which are designed to map to HEIs, the cap on places for FET students acts as an additional challenge.

Stakeholders perceived challenges arising from specific courses and programmes, particularly around provision, quality and qualifications. Stakeholders felt that programmes should be relevant to learner's needs and goals, yet also responsive to industry needs, specifically local economic needs. FET was viewed as too slow to respond to acute skills needs in the workforce, with courses typically taking 9 months to a year to be conceptualised and implemented. Furthermore, the modularised approach would allow for a more flexible approach to allow participants gradually build accreditation.

Progression to employment was viewed as a challenge in rural areas due to fewer opportunities and the high rates of youth unemployment. Finding work placements in rural areas was also perceived as a challenge, since some employers can be hesitant to provide good training and experience to learners that would then become competitors in the region.

Stakeholders voiced concerns about the measurable outcomes of FET for learners leaving the system: *"Is it an end in itself?"* (stakeholder 17). Stakeholders felt that there is a lack of demonstration of the benefit of completing a FET course. This demonstration would require closer monitoring of the outcomes of current learners:

"they're not capturing numbers, experiences, case studies, narratives about how someone's got through and what they're doing a year later" (stakeholder 27)

This enables a lack of accountability regarding outcomes since number of students at intake or 'activity level' is not necessarily a measure of success or outcome. It allows no analysis of learner retention, achievement or subsequent progression. One stakeholder said that there is evidence that there is a huge volume of courses but that does not mean they are either providing the right skills or located in the right region.

Some felt that learner dropout is due to lack of perception of progression and guidance surrounding progression. Progression within the FET sector can be an issue:

"there's no effective continuum; somebody who does a level 3 or level 4 isn't championed or mentored into a level 5 or level 6 that's appropriate. Somebody can

do a Youthreach for two or 3 years and then fall off the end of the earth and nobody gives a damn” (stakeholder 18)

There is quite a lot of regional variation in progression routes to HE; progression routes are usually arranged locally and between one ETB and local IoTs or HEIs. More HEIs and ETBs need to work on improving links and progression pathways as a two-way engagement process. Even when there are pathways to HEIs there is a limit on places. Some stakeholders felt that awareness is improving regarding progression to HE but that this is an area to focus on into the future. There needs to be clear progression paths to demystify potential progression pathways for students; something which is currently being worked on by SOLAS, HEA and DES.

Progression to meaningful employment is also an issue. Stakeholders felt there was a *“possibility for improvement in alignment between FET and employment”* (stakeholder 14). Courses may not be geared towards regional skills deficits, e.g. lots of factories around Shannon but no machine operating course and hard for people from rural areas in Clare to get to the one in Limerick. Employers also felt that there was a gap in the provision offered *“problem is...we structure programmes without the input from employers”* (stakeholder 45) and many employers want graduates with job readiness over hard skills. Those with high support needs e.g. people with autism, intellectual disabilities, mental health difficulties also need to be supported in progression, a stakeholder felt that the only way for this cohort to access work is through supported work/job placements with faded support.

INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE BARRIERS

Stakeholders outlined the lack of information and guidance as a key challenge for prospective learners, even by service providers, due to the challenge of communicating and disseminating information:

“we’ve a new Chief Executive here...[who] can’t believe the level of provision in this organisation even though been in the VEC system for whole career” (stakeholder 2)

QUALITY

Stakeholders’ perspectives diverged regarding the quality of information available. Some felt that there was no shortage of information available but that it can be overwhelming and hard to navigate. The challenge is *“to make people aware of where to look for information”* (stakeholder 8). Prospective learners can encounter problems finding and interpreting official information, which results in learners sourcing word-of-mouth information, a lot of which can be inaccurate; especially regarding entitlements.

“what’s really been effective for us is learners’ stories...hot and cold knowledge...cold is leaflets, databases and people who are most educationally disadvantaged and

don't understand the system generally don't get their information from there they get it from hot knowledge which is word of mouth" (stakeholder 6)

The motivation of students to source information can be very low in terms of FET which has negative consequences for individuals *"if don't use your own initiative you're left in limbo"* (stakeholder 8). However, others felt that there was a lack of quality information. One stakeholder stated that they did not know how prospective learners not on social welfare access relevant information without the guidance of case officers in Intreo. While another felt that the lack of local and national information and awareness on FET options limits participation rates as prospective learners are simply not aware of their options.

Stakeholders agreed that the information that is available can be quite inaccessible to learners:

"Information is one thing, I know their system and if I went into that to try and find a course it's challenging enough because there's such a variety of courses" (stakeholder 6).

TARGET GROUPS

A course provider felt that there was still some way to go in terms of disseminating information to hard-to-reach groups:

"trying to tell people what we do, we have a job of work to do there...are we getting out, telling people what we do, how you can participate in it and the real benefits of it, I don't think we're doing that well enough at all" (stakeholder 2)

It was suggested that FET terminology could be dealt with at the very start of the course and removed from websites. Wording on websites can also be too complex; descriptions are rarely in plain language which makes information inaccessible, especially to learners with literacy difficulties. The adaptability and accessibility of websites can be low for those with disabilities, rarely do FET websites employ adaptability measures such as font change options or read aloud buttons. However, some course providers are trying to increase the accessibility of information on their websites including *"browsealoud and clicker 6 that will allow people with disabilities to access the site"* (stakeholder 2).

Information also needs to be tailored and customised – one size fits all does not speak to individuals. There is a lack of targeted information, particularly for people with disabilities or from migrant communities. Stakeholders mentioned that information specifically for people with disabilities was absent in a lot of cases. One stakeholder mentioned that people with disabilities were the target audience of a recent literacy campaign yet the message was not picked up within the disability special interest groups:

"they're coming late to the table in terms of advertising their offer and then they're not disability-proofing it" (stakeholder 27)

Similarly, interest groups felt that programmes and information aren't targeted at migrants. Migrant communities feel like there has been little to no targeted government communication or activation. One course provider mentioned that to disseminate information about ESOL provision to refugees and asylum seekers you are reliant on word-of-mouth information or outreach events:

“what we've found specifically working with [place], a place for refugees and migrants...you have to physically go on-site to try encourage and develop...we go and provide on-site [information] and then they come to us in the centres” (stakeholder 3)

A stakeholder felt that migrants are also pushed towards certain schemes e.g. childcare, carers. For example, migrant women who are qualified accountants or bankers in their home countries are pushed towards caring professions. Some stakeholders felt that this illustrated the application of negative stereotypes of these women steering them into inappropriate professions.

DISSEMINATION AND PROGRESSION

A lower level of awareness of FET exists compared to HE resulting in a less clear image. This is compounded by the relatively lower value placed on FET compared to HE. There is a perception that school guidance teachers do not consider FET as a viable option, meaning that FET is not suggested as an alternative route to HE.

FET also has a more complex application system compared to the CAO, meaning that there is more work involved on the behalf of the student and parent to get onto an FET course. Conceptually, ETBs and SOLAS remain associated with FÁS. Stakeholders feel that ETBs, and Sola, need better dissemination strategies to create awareness of their roles and to differentiate them from FÁS. For example, open days are a positive development. Stakeholders feel that FET needs to celebrate achievements and invest in advertising the positive programmes e.g. stands in Credit Unions/post offices/GAA clubs. Outreach in schools and CPD for secondary guidance teachers might help reduce the emphasis on the CAO and increase early awareness of FET.

People can enter FET from school, through self-referral and referral from Intreo case officers; and for each entry point guidance offers a valuable benefit:

“information by itself is too bare, people need to interpret it and the principle of guidance is to help interpret it. There's no shortage of information out there - databases upon databases - and then there's the providers themselves but it's the interpretation of that...in a neutral and objective way” (stakeholder 28)

There are too many FET choices, meaning people need guidance yet the adult education guidance service is relatively invisible; people are “falling through the crack” (stakeholder 36).

“pre-guidance is vital...that’s where the connection between the guidance service, the department of social protection is really, really important to explain about what education options are there, what facilities are available whether its full-time or part time, whether there’s grants...and a chance to meet with a guidance counsellor to figure that out” (stakeholder 10)

Intreo is very important in engaging and matching LTUs and job seekers to programmes in ETBs which they are motivated and capable of completing, and that are job market relevant. As such, the link between DSP and FET guidance is fundamental to the encouragement of prospective learners and placement on courses. Instead stakeholders see the complexity of accessing and retaining supports through the social welfare system as a fundamental barrier to FET. Further, the range of FET courses is confusing. Some stakeholders were sceptical of the role of DSP in providing guidance to potential participants: “DSP haven’t a clue” (stakeholder 36).

“it’s the staff at DSP who will determine a person’s suitability for a course, they’re totally unqualified, they’re not trained in career guidance, they’ve no knowledge of the range of industrial sectors and their different demands and requirements” (stakeholder 17)

Others are less damning of the Intreo referral system but remark that there is too much variability and reliance on the quality of the individual Intreo officer. One stakeholder remarked that learners felt that DSP and/or Intreo services and staff are not adequately equipped with information about FET; while some course providers felt that Intreo are more likely to send prospective learners to JobPath programmes over the ETBs, and are only referred to FET when JobPath is unsuccessful. Furthermore, some learners noted negative experiences when accessing FET as an unemployed person. The “customer service” experience for DSP “clients” was largely negative as learners often described that they felt pressure to participate in certain courses. Changes to the organisation of DSP, Intreo and FÁS have also impacted on the engagement case officers have with their clients and the general public. Intreo removes accessibility of information for many people since Intreo services are appointment-dependent.

Guidance is needed prior to, during, and following courses. A stakeholder remarked that learners indicated that assessments prior to commencing a course would be beneficial to ensure they are placed in an appropriate class grouping. Some felt that there was a lack of guidance which would assist learners throughout courses.

“To support somebody’s motivation they need more than support to access a course, they need support while they’re on the course which is why programme-based guidance is vital and it is not acceptable that not everybody who’s attending a FET programme gets access to a guidance service and they can’t because there aren’t the resources” (stakeholder 10)

As Guidance is available before and throughout courses, there is little awareness of this.

DROP OUT

There is relatively low awareness of the drop-out rates from FET:

“getting onto a course is one thing, finishing it and completing it is another...the whole concept of adult learning is that people voluntarily participate in courses whereas now some would be under pressure from DSP to maintain their payment” (stakeholder 6)

Stakeholders were aware of dropout rates from both HEIs and IoTs as well as the main reasons students drop out. These include students who didn’t start the right course and or may not be capable of the requirements of a course (e.g. level of maths for tech courses). HEI’s have put in place strategies to support retention in courses such as additional supports (e.g. maths support centres) and the creation of more general first year to stop people dropping out of overly specialised courses. Although many FET courses would not benefit from more general initial phases, FET could learn from the scaffolding of learners in course that might be beyond their skillset. FET currently encourages progressing through QQI courses but external literacy and numeracy supports which run concurrently to major awards might encourage learners to take on higher level courses.

For others, courses may not be up to expectations or learners may come to the realisation that they do not want to progress or find employment in the area that they are studying. Courses in the realm of beauty and hairdressing were mentioned as keeping learner’s attention while computer or administration courses are more likely to lose learners’ interest. One way to reduce drop out is increasing the level of work experience available; instead of graduating a 25-week course with no experience or links with employers, work experience allows learners to put learning into practice and acts as a motivator.

Respondents suggested that good delivery methods are important for retaining learners. Hands on learning, projects and work placements are more likely to interest and engage non-traditional learners. The development of apprenticeships into new fields was cited as a good model but ‘too middle class’ (stakeholder 32). Traditional apprenticeships (conceived of as those in trades) were perceived as being vocational and alternatives to the pursuit of academic education. New apprenticeships are offered across several areas.

STAKEHOLDERS SUGGESTIONS

Stakeholders were asked what aspects of their work SOLAS should focus on to most effectively reduce the barriers to FET. Suggestions were given at an organisational, informational, programme and access levels.

One stakeholder mentioned that although the emphasis was on critiquing FET and looking at barriers, the mindset should be around *“what more can be done better”* (stakeholder 14). Another stakeholder also mentioned that there are quite high expectations for the new FET bodies, considering the high level of change in the past five years: success stories should be promoted to provide confidence (stakeholder 28). Another stakeholder remarked that FET *“can’t be everything to everybody...not a one-stop-shop”* (stakeholder 8).

Organisationally, stakeholders felt that SOLAS should be clear in its strategy and role in education, ensuring that it did not act as either a new FÁS or ETBI:

“SOLAS was going to become the HSE for FET, it has not become the HSE for FET, it has become the financial manager” (stakeholder 18)

A stakeholder felt that greater strategic clarity and focus would benefit FET, while currently its aim and scope were unclear *“too many fingers in too many pies”* (stakeholder 17). The interaction and relative roles of FET and HE need some greater consideration; comparing how they do interlink and how they should interlink might add clarification (stakeholder 17). The regional skills fora were mentioned as a positive change, since it was the first-time FET and HE had been in a room together (stakeholder 12). However, a stakeholder remarked that a problem arose that ETBs are funded and staffed as 2nd level which does not reflect their role.

It was suggested that the development and provision of the new apprenticeships and traineeships should give a clearer focus to the FET area (stakeholder 14). Some stakeholders felt that the ETBs should be allowed more strategic freedom *“allow providers a bit of time off the treadmill”* (stakeholder 43). While organisationally providers *“would be looking for more flexibility”* (stakeholder 2). Others felt that SOLAS should be providing ETBs with more strategic and ambitious goals, allowing them to progress and specialise to some extent, while *“accept[ing] what they can and can’t do”* (stakeholder 28).

Initiatives are felt to be isolated from each other (e.g. low income, child care, housing) with various state organisations’, departments’ and bodies’ strategic visions needing to be lined up (stakeholder 41). A cross-organisational approach was advised by numerous stakeholders: it was proposed that SOLAS could work more closely in collaboration with other government departments and special interest groups. By working with government departments, such as DES for funding, DSP for funding and referrals and DPER for childcare, SOLAS could develop an interdepartmental discourse and framework for FET. Stakeholders felt that strategic aims and organisational planning should be tied in with expertise and input from existing systems and special interest groups.

A stakeholder suggested that the *“FET Sector needs to develop guidance sector and structure”* (stakeholder 3) where the AEGI is developed into guidance service which supply accessible information across programmes including to people walking in. The NCGE is a department-funded guidance agency which can help in the development of the FET guidance system. However, a lack of cross-organisational communication arose when drafting recent guidance strategies since SOLAS approved ETBs to create a strategy with DSP without the NCGE’s input resulting in an ill-informed strategy.

Marketing needs to be a core focus for SOLAS both as an organisation to those within the FET sector and the marketing of the FET sector in general; particularly to career guidance teachers and Intreo case officers. There is still a misunderstanding of SOLAS as an organisation across the FET sector (stakeholder 10) while ETBs can be either under or over promoted depending on their CEOs. Targeted marketing and communications might provide Intreo with information to outline the relative value of education as compared to working immediately (stakeholder 7) and increase the general value placed on FET (stakeholder 24). The profile of FET needs to change from the ‘poor sister’ of HE where students only choose FET because of lower eligibility requirements (stakeholder 24). Marketing and strengthening existing relationships with DSP to ensure officers are aware of all services and courses on offer would also increase referrals (stakeholder 14). All stakeholders were invested in the success and role of FET and wanted to raise its profile so that it is perceived as a good alternative option within education.

Stakeholders were concerned about quality and accreditation and felt this was an area which SOLAS could focus on:

“Quality matters (38m) regardless of programme being delivered even if not an accredited course – quality needs to be a focus. Needs to be assurance that people are getting quality” (stakeholder 12)

There is a diversity in quality and qualifications which SOLAS could work on in collaboration with the QQI to ensure comparability. *“quality issue – FE qualifications all same level – need control (stakeholder 24)*. QQI turnaround was felt to be too long for the development of new qualifications: *“Turnaround time in QQ1 is too long”* (stakeholder 20) which a stakeholder felt was a barrier to creating links with local employers since FET was incapable of meeting employer needs in a timely fashion (stakeholder 9).

Staff training and development is a key issue which arose in the context of ETBs developing expertise, quality of courses and the inclusion, support and guidance for marginalised groups. New training and upskilling is seen to be essential for the development of programmes, while ongoing professional development is crucial for the maintenance of standards *“FET is only as good as its staff delivering it”* (stakeholder 30). One stakeholder mentioned that a certain amount of teaching time should be allocated to CPD (stakeholder 44). The background of new trainers for vocational courses need to be considered, since

trainers should have practical experience not just theoretical knowledge. (stakeholder 22). Recognition of Prior Learning¹⁵, a method of assessment which may allow learners to gain formal recognising (certification) for knowledge, skills and competence already acquired, which improves capacity for learners to access courses It was clear from their responses that stakeholders were not aware of this. *“SOLAS should work on a framework to recognise prior learning, including non-formal learning and workplace learning, as a means of fulfilling eligibility criteria for those without formal qualifications”* (stakeholder 4). Strategies for learners who do not meet eligibility requirements, including literacy, numeracy and digital literacy, were issues mentioned by some stakeholders. They also suggested that language and maths skills could be embedded in courses and apprenticeships (stakeholder 4). Some interest groups are working on strategies to aid and encourage learners with disabilities into FET courses; parity with funding provision available to HE for Access students would be welcomed. This is an area where SOLAS might need to improve in their dissemination of their service provisions. This could include driving more people to the Further Education Support Service website informing stakeholders and learners on the available supports to help people access programmes. This improved access to information would increase learner’s capacity to access courses in certain areas or by allowing them to make more informed decisions.

A greater focus on delivery modes which are suitable for the target audience should also be considered by SOLAS. While the Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL)¹⁶ area available to educators, none mentioned them in the focus group, nor were any stakeholders aware of them. Many stakeholders advocated for greater flexibility that moves beyond a school model of education e.g. part-time, evening and weekends, online provision, and blended learning (stakeholder 25). Further to the availability of TEL, and the lack of awareness of these services, a systematic strategy for its dissemination and implementation could be beneficial.

The timeframe of courses should also be considered with stakeholders outlining the contrast between FET and private course timelines which provide the same qualifications. Programmes which are focused on vocational fields should include practical as well as theory for learners, in the form of adequate work experience to encourage student engagement and increase work-readiness (stakeholder 8, 22). Work placements and/or experience should also be meaningful, well managed and draw on best practice, meaning that learners have an opportunity to engage in the field. Strategic planning of the timing of work experience would be beneficial (e.g. mid-way as well as near end) in increasing student retention (stakeholder 8). Courses should also be provided which focus on transferable skills

¹⁵ <http://www.fess.ie/images/stories/Assessment/Recognition%20of%20Prior%20Learning%20-%20Engage%20output/engage.html>

¹⁶ <http://www.fess.ie/resource-library/technology-enhanced-learning-tel>

e.g. factory work or call centre (stakeholder 9). Work focused programmes should ensure learners are taught about workplace expectations (stakeholder 22).

Several stakeholders outlined what they viewed as a provision gap: part-time or evening courses for low skilled or under qualified workers. Low-skilled workers are in a vulnerable situation, particularly as unemployment falls and we move more towards a knowledge economy (stakeholder 14). Stakeholders felt there is an opportunity to provide greater training and development to these low skilled employees to enhance employability since they are less likely to receive training while in employment (stakeholder 14). Similarly, this would address the needs of migrants in the labour market that might be trapped in low-skilled or below-skills/under qualified employment (stakeholder 34).

Investment into facilities should be another priority, yet does not need to be ETBs in isolation. A EGFSN report found that some ETBs are sharing facilities with IoTs or other colleges in the locality which can be an effective solution. However, organisations aren't necessarily aware of the local resources which could be used – when facilities are free there is no reason why they shouldn't be shared (stakeholder 14).

CONCLUSION

Overall, there was a sense that FET has a very positive and important role to play in society where the reduction of barriers to FET would have wide ranging benefits *“rise in tide to lift all boats”* (stakeholder 20).

Some stakeholders working in the areas of adult literacy, suggested that there are significant mental health barriers to the uptake of FET courses. They include literacy, computer literacy, essay writing and self-confidence. This is particularly an issue for the long term unemployed. This arises, they suggested, as a result of either being unemployed for a long time, and/or having not engaged in formal education to a sufficient level, or having been out of education for a significant time. The short-term benefits of reducing barriers for individuals, where FET can increase self-esteem, self-confidence, and improve mental and physical health. Reducing the barriers would result in a 'happier cohort' (stakeholder 3) with 'better mental health outcomes' (stakeholder 6). They suggested that people need to feel worthwhile and useful, since under-skilled, under-utilised work has a negative impact on mental health (stakeholder 34). Beyond getting to work, FET allows an opportunity for learners to identify and then test skills and capacities which acts as a huge confidence booster (stakeholder 27).

“If you're at work, in training or employment, you're not at home therefore you're more active, on less medications etc. – being at work, in training etc. is holistically good for people – very few individuals are incapable of working” (stakeholder 27).

In the long-term, education enables learners to progress socially, personally and economically (stakeholder 3) allowing people to be self-sufficient by participating in the labour market *“get jobs, live different lives and promote education within their family”* (stakeholder 41).

At the broader societal level, education has the potential to reduce the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage, improving life outcomes for subsequent generations including health, educational attainment, community engagement and social cohesion. Reducing the barriers to education increases the educational attainment of the population and increases employment readiness, bringing people out of the margins to participate in society (stakeholder 35). Education and employment provides social mobility and social capital and can serve to undermine traditions of unemployment, early school leaving or a poverty of ambition (stakeholder 44). Despite education being ‘free’ to a certain extent, all the other activities which build social/cultural capital cost money; building skills reduces effects of disadvantage across generations (stakeholder 34).

At an economic level, FET has an important role to play in the infrastructure of the skills and development pipeline. Employment exists in a continuum from basic level skills to jobs requiring HE. FET can improve employability and meet the skill needs of the economy as well as employers, particularly in local areas. FET has a role to play in lifelong learning, within society there should be room for those who enter employment at lower levels of skills and then go on to engage in FET (stakeholder 25). There is an additional economic dividend from reducing barriers to FET *“short term investment for long term outcome”* (stakeholder 35): education and employment for disenfranchised individuals removes the onus of inclusion from DSP and social welfare to employers and communities. There are automatic gains to the exchequer by encouraging people to participate in employment and society; net losses from social welfare transfer to net gains through the payment of taxes.

Key points in this chapter

- *Main findings from the literature review, focus groups and stakeholder interviews*
 - *Integrated and presented under the four key themes:*
 - *Motivational/dispositional barriers;*
 - *Economic/social welfare barriers;*
 - *Organisational barriers;*
 - *Information and guidance barriers.*
-

CHAPTER 6: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

INTRODUCTION

The triangulation of perspectives from literature, stakeholders, prospective- and past-learners from the four cohorts who represent the main focus of the research, educators and employers, allows for greater confidence in the findings when themes and issues converge. As seen in the previous chapters, issues which arose for one group were strongly echoed by another. The analytical model focuses on the evaluation of these challenges within the four main themes and explores the way they intersect to highlight barriers to engagement with the FET sector. It examines the current framing of FET across societal levels, discusses how to remove barriers, and the benefits of removing barriers. We identify the main barriers to participation by these groups identified in the research and summarise the possible means of addressing them as suggested by the participants in the study.

MOTIVATIONAL/DISPOSITIONAL BARRIERS

PERCEPTION OF QUALITY OF FET

The perception of the quality of provision differed across courses and colleges. For employers, this presented a challenge since there appeared to be a lack of trust in the qualifications obtained through FET. Confusion arose regarding the differing levels of commitment, time and requirements to obtain the same level qualifications in different fields. This perspective reduces the ability for progression from FET into meaningful and long-term career trajectories which was equally mentioned as a pitfall and deterrent by prospective learners. Employer confidence is an area for development since it is a goal for the successful enactment of the FET strategy (SOLAS, 2014a). The quality of qualifications is of central importance to the profile of FET, which was mentioned across stakeholders and focus groups as “second chance” or “stigmatised”. Instead, FET should be perceived as an obvious and attractive alternative route into employment or Higher Education; SOLAS’s vision is for FET to be perceived as ‘first chance’ (SOLAS, 2014a).

People who are considered 'distant' from the labour market, such as those who are LTU may have considerable confidence and self-esteem issues around FET and employment. Aontas (2013) has found that success in FET for many of these learners requires initial positive learning experiences which often stem from low pressure non-accredited courses, allowing the acquisition of soft skills and building confidence. Some prospective learners, again from these groups, appeared to be daunted by returning to education and felt that they would not have the skills to engage in FET.

The profile and quality of FET has obvious repercussions for employment and progression routes but is also central to the way in which information/guidance and motivation is shaped regarding FET. The research suggests within Intreo, AEGI and post-primary guidance services, guidance counsellors are less likely to recommend or guide learners into the FET sector if it is not perceived as representing a good quality education and real opportunities for employment for their students. Similarly, prospective learners will not go out of their way to engage in education which is perceived as being poor quality or having limited progression routes while also causing an immediate financial burden.

LITERACY AND NUMERACY

Literacy and numeracy difficulties present a barrier to both engaging in FET and finding new employment once unemployed (Kelly et al., 2012). However, Kelly and colleagues (2012) found that unemployed individuals with literacy and/or numeracy difficulties who engage in FET benefit more than average. In addition, a study in the UK found that embedding literacy and numeracy skills into FET increased retention and success rates in courses (Casey et al., 2006). When literacy and numeracy were embedded into FET courses, many learners acquired qualification-level skills as well as the vocational skills taught by the course (Casey et al., 2006). SOLAS is commencing research to look at this in Irish context. The provision of literacy and numeracy supports and reducing the impact of low levels of literacy/numeracy is a key barrier the FET strategy wants to reduce (SOLAS, 2014a). Our findings suggest that a key support needed by learners is in computer literacy and skills.

NEETs represent a diverse group of the unemployed. Eurofound (2012) stated that young people from migrant backgrounds, and people with disabilities, are more likely to be NEET. Despite commonalities in age and status, numerous barriers can co-exist, like other disengaged populations. However, it is crucial to intervene early to prevent NEETs becoming disassociated from education and employment as a socio-cultural norm. The perception of the poor quality of Youthreach presents a barrier for re-engaging NEETs.

Employers recognised that FET has a role in societal inclusion and there were potential Corporate Social Responsibility aspects of engaging with and employing FET learners. Although there was a sense that courses needed to be up to date, meaningful and of high quality, there was also discussion of the role of FET for social inclusion. One employer spoke about the importance of FET for providing confidence and a sense of self-worth, and that

courses should be reminding more disenfranchised community members *“not to give up”*. Employers of FET graduates who were previously unemployed, mentioned people growing in confidence from doing a course, doing a work placement, and going to work. There was a suggestion that basic life skills should be included in courses while interview skills such as talking clearly and the impact of enthusiasm would be beneficial for courses at all levels. These provisions may be of benefit to NEET’s.

ECONOMIC BARRIERS

For many prospective learners, financial or economic issues were the key barriers to returning to education. Costs, grants and entitlements were core issues which caused confusion among learner, stakeholder and educator groups who took part in this study. Due to the complexity of the social welfare system, prospective learners from these groups had encountered perceived economic barriers to taking up an FET course. Clarity regarding the cost of courses and eligibility for grants is one way to reduce this barrier.

Hidden costs, confusion surrounding entitlements and a lack of eligibility for sufficient grants/welfare supplements prevented some individuals from doing courses. In some cases, stakeholders and learners spoke of incidences where prospective learners were given conflicting information in Intreo when compared to FET colleges. Transparency and comparability would be beneficial so that motivated learners and case officers could evaluate the most suitable courses. Individuals also spoke of the benefit of payment plans so that course costs were not confronted immediately. One person mentioned that financial supports needed to consider other costs such as travel and lunch. In addition, participants felt that it would be helpful to have listed costs associated with courses and the grants for which you might be entitled to be explored with a case officer.

For many women, childcare was a prohibitive cost. Mothers suggested that a significant benefit to them would be the availability of crèche facilities for those attending FET courses. Mothers also spoke of the benefit of the free preschool year but said that it was insufficient to allow them to take up a course.

Students also felt that access supports should be there for those with learning difficulties/mental health difficulties. One person mentioned being in a two-year FET course with a deaf student who had to drop out because the class/college couldn’t afford the interpreter for the 2nd year. Another course completer mentioned the importance of supports and a tutor that was approachable.

ORGANISATIONAL BARRIERS

The amalgamation of the ‘Further Education’ and ‘Training’ sectors into FET presented challenges from an organisational perspective. Findings from the literature review, focus groups and the stakeholder interviews demonstrate that participants view FET as having a significant role to play in Irish society. Barriers still exist, however, due to a diverse range of

issues. These include an array of subject areas that need to be covered, the educational challenges it needs to address, and its role in employment creation within Irish society. As evidenced in the literature review and from the perspective of the research participants, there remain significant barriers to progression from FET into the workplace or to higher education for these groups.

One stakeholder mentioned that although the emphasis was on critiquing FET and looking at barriers, the mindset should be around *“what more can be done and what can be done better”* (stakeholder 14). Another stakeholder also mentioned that there are quite high expectations for the new FET bodies, considering the significant changes in the past five years: success stories should be promoted to provide confidence (stakeholder 28). In addition, one stakeholder remarked that FET *“can’t be everything to everybody... [it is] not a one-stop-shop”* (stakeholder 8). It is within this context that barriers to participation in FET should be viewed, and that feedback from stakeholders and focus groups should be situated.

Organisationally, stakeholders felt that SOLAS should be clear in its strategy and role in education, ensuring that it did not act as either a new FÁS or ETBI. A stakeholder felt that greater strategic clarity and focus would benefit FET, while currently its aim and scope were unclear. The interaction and relative roles of FET and HE need some greater consideration; comparing how they do interlink and how they should interlink might add clarification. The regional skills fora were mentioned as a positive change, since it was the first-time FET and HE had been in a room together.

Educators acknowledged that the profile of FET has improved now that it has been recognised as a sector; yet this has come with challenges since it is now seen as a *“training sector”*. This shift in emphasis has had serious organisational impact and means that educators feel that the education provided in FE colleges is only valued for its ability to progress learners into the labour market. Educators also felt that some stigma still existed around FET and that it was difficult to ameliorate this situation when career guidance teachers and schools are looking to compete in the ‘league tables’. However, this stigmatisation was seen to be more from the post-primary sector since most educators spoke about the increase in links and progression routes between their colleges and HE.

It was suggested that the development and provision of the new apprenticeships and traineeships should give a clearer focus to the FET area. Some stakeholders felt that the ETBs should be allowed more strategic freedom. Others felt that SOLAS should be providing ETBs with more strategic and ambitious goals, allowing them to progress and specialise to some extent, while *“accept[ing] what they can and can’t do”* (stakeholder 28).

Initiatives are felt to be isolated from each other (e.g. low income, child care, housing) with various state organisations’, departments’ and bodies’ strategic visions needing to be lined up. A cross-organisational approach was advised by numerous stakeholders: SOLAS should

be working more closely in collaboration with government departments and special interest groups. By working with government departments, such as DES for funding, DSP for funding and referrals and DPER for childcare, SOLAS would be mitigated against the impacts of departmental decisions and have a framework in place for FET to provide holistic supports. Stakeholders felt that strategic aims and organisational planning should be tied in with expertise and input from existing systems and special interest groups.

WORK EXPERIENCE

Work experience or placement was seen as a crucial aspect of an FET course that will enable the learner gain employment upon completion of their education. Meaningful work experience that could link to subsequent employment was seen as the gold standard by students, who felt otherwise as if they were completing courses that no one wanted to employ them after.

Students also felt that the colleges should take some responsibility for ensuring that students found work experience, which outside of Dublin was viewed as particularly challenging. Obvious connections with employers and progression opportunities were suggested as a key motivating factor for students. Prospective students were much more likely to participate in a course if they knew there was a high chance of obtaining employment.

Employers were positive about the role of FET and felt that there was greater scope for colleges to create links with local employers. Employers felt that the colleges should be proactive in their area, reaching out to local employers for both work placements and marketing the potential of their graduates. One employer had been contacted by a local FE college for work placements, which was positive since employers generally felt there was a need for practical experience after school. Therefore, there was a feeling that FET reaching out to employers for work experience would be welcomed from employers i.e. “we’ve 30 people on this course, would you be interested in supporting 15 of them”. Employers also felt that taking on students on FET courses for work experience would provide them with an opportunity to assess individual skills, abilities and suitability for roles within their companies while taking on minimal economic risk themselves. This was particularly pertinent for the under 25’s and members of migrant communities.

QUALITY

Stakeholders and employers were concerned around quality and accreditation and felt this was an area which SOLAS could focus on.

There is a diversity in quality and qualifications which SOLAS could work on in collaboration with the QQI to ensure comparability. Similarly, employers mentioned worrying that quality was not assured in the FET system, with substantial variation based on individual courses and colleges. There was a feeling amongst the employers that there needed to be greater

monitoring “*supposed to be monitored by QOI but that’s not the reality*”; and some quality assurance: “*very cosy...no KPIs*”.

QOI turnaround was felt to be too long for the development of new qualifications, which a stakeholder felt was a barrier to creating links with local employers since FET was incapable of meeting employer needs in a timely fashion. This fed into the perception of prospective learners that there were no obvious progression pathways. This was true for all participants in the study, however particularly important for the long term unemployed.

STAFF CPD

Staff training and development is a key issue which arose in the context of the FET colleges developing expertise, improving the quality of courses and the inclusion, support and guidance for marginalised groups. New training and upskilling is seen to be essential for the development of programmes, while ongoing professional development is crucial for the maintenance of standards “*FET is only as good as its staff delivering it*” (stakeholder 30). One stakeholder mentioned that a certain amount of teaching time should be allocated to CPD. The background of new trainers for vocational courses need to be considered, as trainers should have practical experience not just theoretical knowledge. Further, staff and colleges should be consulted regularly in the co-design of the curriculum.

Educators spoke of the new emphasis on training for the workforce, which tied into the development of a new apprenticeship model and courses designed for labour-force skills deficits. However, there was a perspective that educators were offering modules which were within their current skillset. This led to the perception that there was a deficit in skills that course completers were bringing to the labour market as well as learners dropping out when courses were not as expected. CPD for educators and greater funding to enable the creation of new courses or the retention of under-subscribed courses was a core challenge.

Former learners and those who dropped out also mentioned the diversity in standards of teaching; although there were many positive experiences reported, and the educators themselves were extremely dedicated and focused on the delivery of excellent courses, some learners reported having negative experiences of educators and teaching styles. Particularly for those who had been out of education or the labour market for a long time, empathy and confidence building were important attributes of educators. The way students were treated was very important with some former FET students mentioning classmates who dropped out because they were being treated like post-primary level students. As in all third level, it is important for students to feel respected and that they are being treated as adults; particularly when mature students are returning to education. Equally, support was often needed for core skills such as completing assignments and using computers.

ACCESS

Enhancing access and eligibility should also be considered by SOLAS. SOLAS and other stakeholders should be working on supports to help people access programmes, whether it is by model of delivery, increased access in certain areas or improved access to information to allow people to make better informed decisions.

An ability to choose a course of study was very important. There were differing perspectives on entry requirements and available supports for courses. Some people felt that aptitude tests or other screeners made sense and were important for courses. Others felt that the change at age 23 to becoming a mature student with reduced eligibility requirements made little sense. From an employers' perspective, there was a sense that there should be some onus on educators and colleges to assess suitability and interest as well as ability for courses. Employers felt that progression was easier for graduates who had enthusiasm for the field so interviews should assess enthusiasm *"not just tick boxes"*.

SOLAS should work on a framework to recognise prior learning, including non-formal learning and workplace learning, as a means of fulfilling eligibility criteria for those without formal qualifications. Strategies for learners who do not meet eligibility requirements, including literacy, numeracy and digital literacy, should also be considered. Language and maths skills could be embedded in courses and apprenticeships. Some interest groups are working on strategies to aid and encourage learners with disabilities into FET courses; yet parity with HE funding provision for Access students may encourage this further. This funding model is currently under consideration.

FLEXIBILITY IN DELIVERY

Educators spoke about the diversity of students within their classes and the restrictions they felt the curricula placed on enabling them to provide an education:

"education is no longer about all of the positive stuff of education"

Particularly for mature students or those returning to education, educators felt that rigid curricula and prescriptive assessment schedules placed undue pressure on students that should be eased into learning. In some cases, the curriculum did not allow scope for interesting or innovative ideas, which made courses less interesting for teachers and students alike:

"I think it's no coincidence that the most enjoyable things for me and the students are the things that aren't prescribed in the curriculum".

Educators felt the stricter qualification guidelines should be removed, allowing a return to flexibility in awards to enable learners to build qualifications through part time and flexi-courses.

Stakeholders felt there is an opportunity to provide greater training and development to these low skilled employees to enhance employability since they are less likely to receive training while in employment. Similarly, this would address the needs of migrants in the labour market that might be trapped in low-skilled or below-skills/under qualified employment.

At the institutional level, educators also felt that there should be a reduction in bureaucracy and greater emphasis put on the role of education over the economics of education. Educators felt that people should be on courses that they want to be on and that no one should be forced onto a course, particularly since achievement tends to be poor when there is an absence of motivation. Educators felt that ETBs need to stop running as businesses, since emphasis is placed on the wrong aspects of the sector.

Historically, due to previous lack of centralised planning (FET strategy, p87), the ETBs and SOLAS were viewed as slow to react to labour market needs. Stakeholders mentioned many constraints resulting in long lag times to create new and relevant courses. The length of ETB courses was an issue mentioned by prospective and past learners. They felt that private colleges offered the same level accredited course over much shorter time periods. Consequently, they felt that this made courses longer than necessary, reducing their motivation to participate.

A greater focus on delivery modes which are suitable for the target audience should also be considered. Many stakeholders advocated for greater flexibility that moves beyond a school model of education e.g. part-time, evening and weekends, online provision, and blended learning. The timeframe of courses should also be considered with stakeholders and prospective learners outlining the contrast between FET and private course timelines which provide the same qualifications. Programmes which are focused on vocational fields should include practical as well as theory for learners in the form of work experience to encourage student engagement and increase work-readiness. Work placements and/or experience should also be meaningful, well managed and draw on best practice, meaning that learners have an opportunity to engage in the field. Strategic planning of the timing of work experience (e.g. mid-way as well as near end) was suggested as a strategy to increase student retention. Courses should also be provided which focus on transferable skills e.g. factory work or call centre. Work focused programmes should ensure learners are taught about workplace expectations.

Prospective learners who never engaged in FET appear not to have engaged for several reasons. Beyond the financial consequences and a lack of information, many felt that courses would be too academic and complex, and require too much 'book-learning' and too many assignments.

It was also suggested that a lack of supports existed for active inclusion groups such as those with disabilities and recent migrants. Partially, this was seen to be linked with funding

deficits but there was a stakeholder perception that many FET colleges remained inaccessible to those with disabilities. Stakeholders mentioned a lack of engagement with ‘universal design’ learning and a lack of flexibility in delivery which might be needed by those for whom full-time provision may be inaccessible.

INFORMATIONAL BARRIERS

AVAILABILITY OF INFORMATION

A lack of clear information and where to source it arose as a core issue for prospective learners. In many cases, prospective learners were presented with options to take up FET as a means of retaining welfare payments. Instead, prospective learners would like to be made aware of options and courses to which they would be suited and which might fit with previous work experience. Another respondent said that at the interview stage a lot more information should be provided outlining the course content. A suggestion given was to provide an information package. Several people who had completed courses or dropped out felt that a lot more information should be given about the course details including associated costs and course content:

“I signed up for something I didn’t realise and I was three weeks into the course and I was like this is not what I signed up for at all” (G2).

Tailoring the courses to the needs and interests of the individual could be accomplished through a support system such as that currently being rolled out through the JobPath programme. This includes detailed interviews with the individual to establish their education and career interests, their history and existing skill set, and what additional barriers may exist in their engagement with FET and/or employment, and from this information develop a suitable programme for the individual. Some mentioned the information disconnect between FET colleges and Intreo. It was also suggested that Intreo is less accessible than FÁS used to be; there were reports of mixed responses to the potential benefits of computer kiosks, and that one needed an appointment to meet and talk to someone. There was also the suggestion of a Freephone for people to find out information about courses since many potential learners might not have the confidence to walk in. This would also help those who do not have a computer or computer skills. This supports the desire for a personalised and tailored approach to a learning and career development programme for each individual.

The primary barrier perceived by prospective learners was a lack of knowledge about the FET sector, particularly the range of courses and methods through which you could access them. Information provision around FET was sparse and insufficient, creating unnecessary barriers for prospective students. Focus group attendees were unaware of fetchcourses.ie as a resource. All the learner groups who took part in this study viewed promoting the

benefits of FET through effective marketing and advertising as important in reducing barriers to participation.

All groups suggested that advertising through mediums including buses, the Luas, television, radio and social media (such as Facebook) would be beneficial. Participants noted that each medium had positives and negatives and that a multi-media, multi-platform campaign would be the most effective. One participant also noted that advertisements in post offices for FET could be a positive way to target unemployed people “*showing that this isn’t it for the rest of your life*” (D3). There were also suggestions to make information accessible. One group outlined the need for information to be clear and easy to interpret. Respondents also outlined the benefits of using testimonials; while others spoke about the importance of framing FET courses in a positive light.

ETBs could improve their role in raising the profile of FET within their subsidiary colleges, yet this comes with challenges since many FE colleges offer similar courses and educators saw themselves as competing for the same pool of students. A few younger participants mentioned the importance of marketing within schools to ensure that post-primary students were aware of FET. Part of this initiative could include testimonials from past participants who had attended courses. Advertising was seen as crucial to increase awareness of FET as an alternative route to education amongst upper secondary level students. People of all age groups felt that open days would be a positive addition, and where they are already on offer open days should be more widely advertised. Some people have had positive experiences of open days; although others mentioned open days thrown by DSP which were oversubscribed and people had to be turned away. There was also a suggestion to host a FET fair in the RDS like the existing Higher Education fair

Beyond the awareness of ETBs as sites of FET, information must also be presented in a way which is easily accessible for each of the active inclusion groups. Sourcing course information in an accessible way can be hard for many of the target activation groups: an unnecessary barrier for those who are motivated to seek FET. As such, the delivery of information must cater for those with literacy and/or numeracy difficulties, web literacy issues, English as a second language; and those with special educational needs e.g. dyslexia. Some ETBs provide supports on their websites such as the ability to change font size but this is not widespread / the norm within the sector. Respondents suggested removing the ‘jargon’ associated with FET from advertising and disseminating information about FET and that making it clear and accessible in colloquial English would be very beneficial.

GUIDANCE AND CHOICE

Prospective students on social welfare tended to agree that they would like to have the choice around courses. However, they were open to gaining help from Intreo in applying for courses if there was someone there who knew the system and actively wanted to help

them. For many people, they found it hard to know who they could speak to in the Intreo system and spoke of the over-reliance on computers with limited interpersonal interaction.

The provision of good quality guidance can provide people with insight and direction for study, training and employment for years to come. Within second level schools, guidance is provided on the options and opportunities following post-primary education. Even more important is guidance for those who are outside the 'traditional' educational trajectory: those who are disengaged with mainstream education e.g. early school leavers or NEETs; those who have not engaged in FET in a long time or at all (e.g. the LTU); some people with literacy or numeracy issues who may struggle to find information themselves; the migrant population who arrive unaware of opportunities or the structure of FET in Ireland; and individuals with disabilities who may need guidance around manageable career paths. Marketing needs to be a core focus for SOLAS as an organisation, both to those within the FET sector and the marketing of the FET sector in general; particularly to career guidance teachers and Intreo case officers. There is still a misunderstanding of SOLAS as an organisation across the FET sector while ETBs can be either under or over promoted depending on their CEOs. Targeted marketing and communications might provide Intreo with information to outline the relative value of education as compared to working immediately and increase the general value placed on FET. The profile of FET needs to change from the 'poor sister' to HE, where students only choose FET because of lower eligibility requirements. This will require a rebranding of FET. The anchors for this branding are reduced complexity, clear paths to employment, and/or clear paths to higher education. Strengthening existing relationships with DSP to ensure officers are aware of all services and courses on offer would also increase referrals. All stakeholders were invested in the success and role of FET and wanted to raise its profile so that it is perceived as a good alternative option within education.

Respondents who had dropped out of courses did so for several reasons: the course was too focussed on theory; the course was too easy; or the course was too difficult. Proper guidance and information prior to the course would have prevented learners from starting a course which was inappropriate to their interest, or beyond their capacity or current educational attainment.

Employers felt that links would also be improved by raising the profile and awareness of FET. For those who had not employed a FET graduate there was some confusion around various courses, schemes and the remit of the education and training aspects of FET. Advertising was suggested through both radio and television; while employers felt that there should be a better website which HR and employers could link into which enabled them to look at the various courses and qualifications. There was a sense that FET was not reaching out to businesses: "*are they engaging much with the business community?*"; and that a marketing strategy like the universities use might raise the profile and standing of FET.

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

This research project examined the barriers to Further Education in Ireland for some of the most vulnerable groups in Ireland. It engaged with key stakeholders from across a wide range of organisations and potential and previous participants in FET, as well as FET educators and employers. This unique mix of perspectives provided insights collectively illustrating the full range of barriers from their various viewpoints, illuminating these challenges from throughout the lifecycle of the education of the individual through to achieving employment or accessing higher education. It examined these barriers as those which present obstacles to engagement and completion by individual, the collective/communal/cultural barriers, as well as examining the role FET plays in society more generally as a means of promoting education and enabling upskilling for all Irish citizens and vulnerable groups. The main issues for consideration for SOLAS in the derivation of their recommendations to reduce barriers to FET are summarised under the key headings below.

MOTIVATIONAL / DISPOSITIONAL BARRIERS

An emphasis on FET as a viable option for school leavers and those on welfare would be beneficial. This early intervention at the career guidance level in schools, and through Intreo offices, guiding individuals to courses while emphasising what it may mean for their career (employment, progression to higher level) would be welcomed and reduce motivational barriers.

A suite of measures which are focused around outreach to communities, and particularly vulnerable groups should continue through existing mechanisms and institutions. The inclusion of stakeholder organisations, such as the voluntary sector, who work directly with these vulnerable groups may break down barriers to engagement as they, in many cases, have close connections directly with these cohorts. They have unique and valuable insights into the needs and concerns of these groups.

Other initiatives addressing cultural barriers, reducing the influence of intergenerational negative perspectives of education, and improving social mobility would be beneficial. The mentoring approach, as being rolled out via the JobPath programme would be a model that could be executed through Intreo. This would support the development of personalised programmes tailored to the educational, career interests and capabilities of the individual. This participative approach has the potential for the engagement and retention of learners in FET.

ECONOMIC BARRIERS

The main economic barriers which exist include the availability and access to childcare and transport. One way in which this could be addressed, suggested by a focus group participant, is by making child care facilities available for learners who are attending FET courses. In addition, a number of respondents suggested that the modularisation courses,

and making them available part time would go some way to enabling people who cannot commit to a full-time course. This would be particularly relevant for lone parents. Further, widening the courses which are available part time would also be beneficial. Focus Group participants and stakeholders suggested that the provision of free transport would incentivise those to take part. The provision of multiple courses in multiple locations would also go some way towards mitigating this challenge. The facilitation of course modules in an online capacity would be of benefit for some in reducing their need to travel to the course, and allow them to take certain modules at their own pace. This would not be suitable for many courses, nor many individuals, as they may rely on the culture of the class room to promote a learning environment. It would, however, be of benefit to some learners and in certain areas.

Clarification and simplification of the welfare system would be extremely helpful. Many respondents reported being unsure as to whether they could retain their benefits, and if this was subject to specific courses, or specific cases, or applied to all courses and all potential participants. The capacity to retain one's welfare benefits across all course types would entice participants to take part and retain those who are currently attending. Focus Group participants also spoke of the economic challenges of attending courses since social welfare benefits do not acknowledged additional costs such as lunch, course books or required kits.

ORGANISATIONAL BARRIERS

Greater comparability and oversight on qualifications was suggested by stakeholders and employers. Educators mentioned differences between colleges resulting in different levels of enthusiasm for courses, while employers noted differences in skills acquired across colleges.

A broad range of stakeholders, employers and learners, voiced a desire for improved engagement with them in an ongoing discourse about the role of FET. This discourse would allow for all participants (learner, employer, and stakeholder) to be involved in the design of the FET system. This could be achieved through ongoing dialogue (with stakeholders and employers), further research (with all), and continuous feedback (from learners and employers). This would allow SOLAS to effectively tailor courses directly to the needs of the labour market and the learner. This could, eventually, culminate in the collective co-design of courses in response to a compendium of needs; which themselves are constantly evolving. This level of engagement has proven to be effective in encouraging new, and the retention of existing students as they have had input into the design of the courses themselves.

A further emphasis on meaningful and assessed work experience would be appreciated by employers and prospective students alike. The apprenticeship model was positively received by all participants including learners, stakeholders and employers. This should be rolled out in a much broader sense including far longer periods of work experience.

Greater flexibility and responsiveness within the organisation of the course system and delivery of courses was suggested by many stakeholders and focus group attendees. Private sector courses were seen as having greater flexibility in delivery and responsivity to the labour market.

Further, expanding upon the provision of courses, the range and availability of access courses which bridge the gap for those with skill needs such as literacy, numerical skills and ICT skills would allow them to engage in subject specific learning.

FET fairs were also suggested as an effective way of engaging all potential participants and potentially vulnerable groups. They would act in the same capacity as the Higher Educational fairs, with FET schools and colleges attending and meeting directly with potential students. Employers would also be interested in attending these days to better understand what training potential employees are receiving.

Finally, it was suggested that situating courses in existing institutions; e.g. the Institutes of Technology, rather than an institution which is difficult to access, would promote a culture of education and be served by existing transport and other facilities (e.g. child care, amenities etc.). Collectively these measures could better meet the needs of individuals, and allow for courses to be scheduled in a manner maximising attendance and retention of learnings, and hence making the course as cost effective as possible with the highest possible impact on the needs of the local communities.

INFORMATIONAL BARRIERS

Information should be provided in a clear and transparent way. This is particularly important when it comes to entitlements and access pathways to encourage prospective learners who are unemployed. This includes removing jargon from all communications and make the same information available across multiple platforms.

There was a general perception that Intreo was not providing fully informed choices about FET options. Although there were some very good experiences of Intreo referrals, there were also some very mixed experiences. Some CPD surrounding the FET sector and the availability of courses and grants would be beneficial.

Simplification of the availability of courses, and what they allow the learner to achieve (whether this be a pathway to the workforce, or to higher education), should be clearly described. This can easily be built into the existing fetchcourses.ie website and be made available across information sources through Intreo and printed materials.

Appropriate guidance supports should be provided to the learner before, during and after their course as part of measures to improve their quality of life. These supports, across the course of the career of the learner, should be standardised. Prospective learners, in some cases, reported being 'put off' by a perception that they were viewed as figures to fill classes rather than as individuals. This would improve awareness of the current service offerings

available through FET, how one can apply for them, what is entailed in taking the course, what the participant will gain from the course, and their role in improving the quality of life of the individual, their family and wider community.

To counteract the lack of awareness of SOLAS, and to clarify the difference between them and FÁS, SOLAS could engage (or participate) in a national brand awareness campaign built upon the marketing of FET courses and targeting the particularly vulnerable groups involved in this study. This would have the dual purpose of raising its profile and situating FET as a viable alternative to Higher Education, while reducing the informational and motivational barriers. This could be implemented across multiple platforms including radio, television, online and social media simultaneously and in conjunction with the launch of a new initiative.

To maximise the impact of this campaign, the campaign should focus on making key messages resonant to potential participants from these groups by incentivising them via mediums which recognises their need for immediate reward and emphasise the cumulative rewards of long term engagement with education. Ultimately, the effective provision of information and support promotes engagement, reduces pre-existing socio-cultural barriers, and may reduce the trade-off between short term gain of remaining on welfare and part time unskilled work, versus long terms benefits of education and the career prospects they include.

In summary the main challenge for SOLAS in reducing barriers to FET are: the lack of information and clarity around individual courses; the role of SOLAS and FET in general; addressing the negative socio-cultural attitudes towards FET; improved awareness of, and access to, access courses (supports for ICT and English language); greater clarity regarding social welfare entitlements; improving course availability and content; better engagement with employers; better engagement with educators and improved supports for educators; and clarifying subsequent pathways of progression to employment and/or Higher Education for learners. Addressing these main issues would clarify what impact attending an FET course would have for the learner, allow educators to more effectively carry out their duties and enable employers access to a better educated and higher skilled workforce who meet their needs. Addressing these barriers in a systematic and engaged way may reduce many of the issues encountered by LTU, the under 25 NEETs, and other main target groups including people with disabilities and migrant populations.

The findings presented advance the potential for: revisions to the approaches taken in the organisational structure of the FET programmes; the dissemination of accurate and appropriate information through the right communication mediums and to the right audiences/cohorts; and the reduction of economic barriers to participation in FET. These suggestions also consider the needs of the most vulnerable groups. The report also proposes mechanisms which support excellence in teaching and learning in the FET programme as this applies to 'active inclusion'. Cumulatively, they focus on reducing

motivational and dispositional barriers for potential learners from these groups, enabling the most disadvantaged and vulnerable to fully participate in society through improved access to education and employment. This has the potential to promote and implement FET policies on access and participation which are more efficient and effective in meeting the needs of its primary target groups.

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Motivational/Dispositional					
	Lit Review	Stakeholder	FGs	Educators	Employers
Age	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Mental Health problems and/or learning difficulties	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Confidence/Self-esteem	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Negative previous educational experiences	✓	✓	✓		
Familial disengagement with education	✓	✓			
Social supports	✓	✓	✓		
Profile of FET (stigmatised)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Figure 6: Summary Table: Motivational / Dispositional Barriers

Economic and Social Welfare					
	Lit Review	Stakeholder	FGs	Educators	Employers
Childcare	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Transport	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Other costs associated with courses		✓	✓	✓	
Social Welfare entitlements while learning	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Confusion re entitlements	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Figure 7: Summary Table: Economic and Social Welfare Barriers

Organisational					
	Lit Review	Stakeholder	FGs	Educators	Employers
Courses on offer/ course emphasis		✓	✓	✓	✓
Delivery method	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Flexibility in delivery	✓	✓	✓		
Course length		✓	✓		
Academic year	✓	✓	✓		
Eligibility requirements & Recognition of Prior Learning	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Computer skills		✓	✓		

requirements					
Curriculum requirements (e.g. rote learning, exams)			✓	✓	
Work experience			✓		✓
Accessibility		✓	✓		
Perceptions of quality of teaching/qualifications		✓	✓		✓
No perception of progression	✓	✓	✓	✓ (for lower level courses)	✓
Requirement to fill courses				✓	

Figure 8: Summary Table: Organisational Barriers

Informational and Guidance					
	Lit Review	Stakeholder	FGs	Educators	Employers
Lack of awareness of FET/SOLAS		✓	✓	✓	✓
Lack of information	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Unclear information – jargon etc.		✓	✓		✓
Intreo as information source/referral		✓	✓	✓	
Lack of career guidance/course matching	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Lack of Needs assessments				✓	

Figure 9: Information and Guidance Barriers